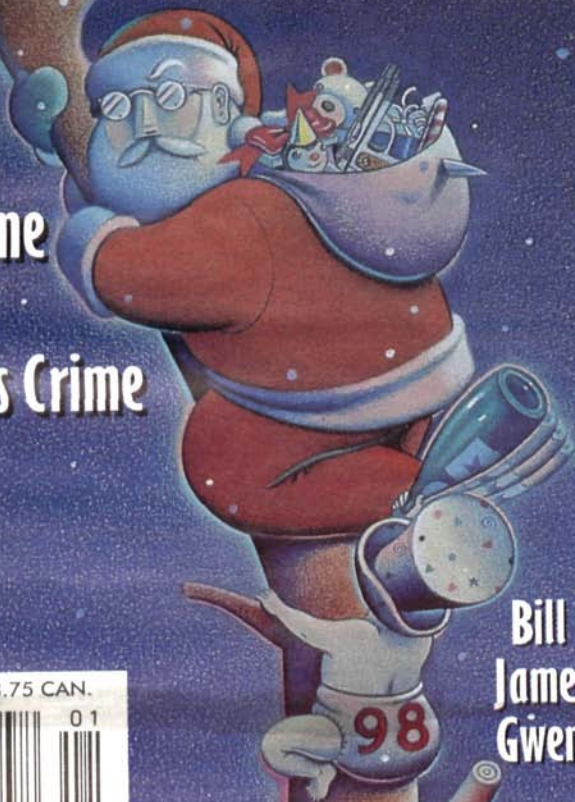


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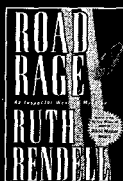
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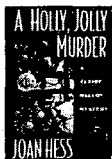
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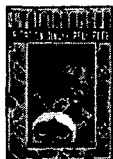
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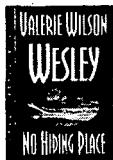
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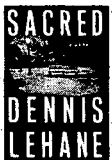
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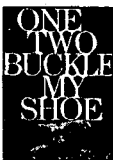
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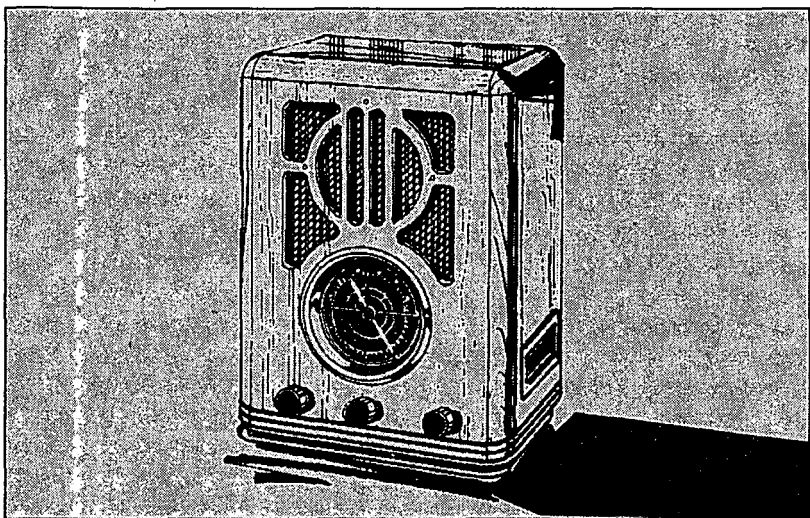
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THE WIRELESS BLUFF

by L. J. Washburn



Hallam hadn't been to Fort Worth since the late twenties. A lot had changed in a decade and a half. Back then, even though Fort Worth had already grown into a city, a man could look at the place and see the frontier town it had once been. Now those vestiges of an earlier time were pretty much gone, replaced by structures of glass and steel that speared toward the sky and almost made Hallam feel like he was back in L.A.

Beside him, his daughter Beth let out a surprised whistle. "You didn't tell me Fort Worth was this big, Lucas," she said.

"Didn't know it was," Hallam replied as he picked up their suitcases and started through the lobby of the train station. The red-headed twelve-year-old hurried along beside him, carrying a smaller bag. Her coltish legs enabled her to keep up with her father's long strides.

Hallam knew he looked more like Beth's grandfather than her

daddy. The shaggy hair that poked out from under his fedora was gray, as was the drooping moustache. His face was seamed by sun and wind and burned to the color of old saddle leather. Beth had been born late in his life, too late for any sensible fella to be having a kid, but Hallam had always been one to play the hand he was dealt. Besides, he was still in pretty good shape for his age, and he didn't dwell on the fact that he was already grown when the centuries changed. A careful man kept an eye on his back trail, Hallam's own daddy had been fond of saying, but a wise man watched where he was going, too.

"Lucas! There you are!"

The woman's voice made Hallam stop and look around. Coming toward them was a handsome, white-haired woman in her late sixties. The family resemblance was strong, which was bad luck for his sister, Hallam thought. He put his arms around her, hugged her, and said, "Howdy, Sarah."

She kissed him on the cheek, then turned to the girl. "This can't be Beth! She's gotten so big."

Beth turned her eyes toward the floor and looked uncomfortable. Hallam said, "Say howdy to your Aunt Sarah, Beth."

"Howdy," Beth mumbled.

Sarah hugged her, adding to Beth's discomfort, then she turned back to Hallam and said, "I can't thank you enough for coming, Lucas. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't. When the police came and arrested Johnny, I just . . . just . . ."

Beth looked up sharply, and Hallam winced. As far as Beth knew, they had come to Fort Worth simply to visit relatives and see some of Hallam's old stomping grounds.

He hadn't said anything about murder.

Now the cat was most of the way out of the bag, so Hallam patted his sister on the shoulder and said, "Don't you worry, Sarah. We'll get this mess all sorted out."

L. J. Washburn's sleuth Lucas Hallam debuted a decade ago in a story for a *Private Eye Writers of America* anthology. Since then he has brought his author several honors, including a Shamus Award for best novel. The last Hallam story *EQMM* published ("Double Take" 12/95) was selected for *The Year's 25 Finest Crime and Mystery Stories*. †

"Johnny didn't kill that man. He swore to me that he didn't, and he wouldn't lie."

"Of course he didn't kill nobody." Hallam glanced at Beth, saw the interest shining in her eyes. "You take Beth on home with you, and I'll take a *pasear* up to the jail to see him."

"I want to go with you, Lucas," Beth said eagerly, just as he had known she would.

"Not this time," Hallam told her. He was going to make it stick, too.

Beth looked up at the Tarrant County Courthouse, impressive in its dark granite and marble majesty, and said, "Is this the jail?"

"Next door," Hallam said. "Stay in the car with your aunt."

He hadn't been able to talk Beth into going home with Sarah, but they had reached a compromise. Sarah had driven them in her car from the south end of downtown, where the depot was located, to the north end, where Hallam now stood in front of the courthouse.

"I want to go with you and meet my cousin Johnny," Beth said from the backseat of Sarah's Ford roadster.

"A jail ain't no place for a little girl, and Johnny's got a lot on his mind right now." *Like being charged with murder*, Hallam added to himself.

"I'm not a little girl anymore," Beth protested.

Hallam grunted. "Don't remind me."

Without giving her a chance to argue anymore, he swung away from the car and strode toward the building next to the courthouse that housed the Tarrant County sheriff's department and lockup. Kenneth Ward's body had been found outside the city limits, in the northwest part of the county near Eagle Mountain Lake. So it had been sheriff's deputies who had arrested Johnny Reeves.

"You got my nephew in here," Hallam said to the deputy on duty at the desk in the jail. "I'd like to see him."

The deputy was a young man with slicked-down hair parted in the middle, and his voice was even more of a drawl than Hallam's as he asked, "And who might that be, old-timer?"

Hallam's eyes narrowed at being called an old-timer, but that was exactly what he was, he reminded himself. Reining in his temper, he said, "Johnny Reeves. My name's Lucas Hallam."

"Lemme check." The deputy looked at a list on his desk. "Yeah, Reeves's mama said you'd be stoppin' by." He leaned forward as

he noted something else on the paperwork. "Say, what's this? You a real private eye, mister?"

"Licensed in California," Hallam said. "Here in Texas I'm just a citizen."

"You know Dan Turner? Lordy, I like to read about them adventures he gets into." The deputy's face creased in a grin. "It sure is funny the way all them gals seem to lose their clothes whenever Dan Turner's around. That's a mighty neat trick. You ever run into him out there in Hollywood?"

Hallam hesitated, unsure whether to explain to the deputy about how all those yarns in the pulp magazines were just made-up stories. Not wanting to disillusion the man, he said, "Nope, never have run into ol' Dan."

"Well, if you do, tell him Burt from Fort Worth says howdy." The deputy snapped his fingers and stood up. "Oh yeah, you wanted to see one of the prisoners. Come on."

Three minutes later, a jailer ushered Hallam into a cell and clanged the door shut behind him. Hallam frowned. He never had liked that sound, no matter which side of the bars he might be on.

The man in the cell sat on the bunk, smoking a cigarette. He was in his forties and seemed small, especially next to the tall, broad-shouldered Hallam. Johnny Reeves had gotten that from his father, Hallam supposed. Ben Reeves hadn't been a big man, but he had treated Sarah decent. That was all Hallam could ask for in a brother-in-law. Ben had been gone for quite a few years now, ten or twelve at least.

"Uncle Lucas?" Johnny asked as he looked up at Hallam. He got to his feet, dropped the smoke onto the floor and stepped on it, held out his hand. "Good to see you again." He smiled sheepishly. "I just wish it wasn't under these circumstances."

Hallam shook hands with his nephew and said, "You and me both, Johnny. This has been mighty hard on your mama. She tells me you didn't kill that fella."

Johnny blinked. "Well, of course I didn't. You believe me, don't you, Uncle Lucas?"

"I don't know you well enough to say either way," Hallam said bluntly. "You're blood kin, so I want to believe you didn't. But you'd best sit down and tell me about it."

"Sure. Sure." Johnny passed a hand over his face. "Pull up that stool."

There was a three-legged stool in a corner of the cell. Hallam

hooked it with a toe. He sat down as Johnny sank back onto the bunk.

Johnny took a deep breath before he began. He was pale, and Hallam could tell how shaky he was under the surface calm. Johnny had been named after his grandfather, but he didn't have the strength of old John Hallam.

"You know about the radio station," Johnny finally said.

Hallam nodded. "Know you used to own one, till you got fleeced out of it."

"It was a swindle, all right," Johnny said with some heat. "Nothing but a damned swindle. Ward offered to let me in on one of his cattle deals, but I had to put up the station as my part of the investment. Then it all went sour, and I lost the station. I didn't find out until later that the company that took it over was owned by Ward, too. He was buying and selling cattle to himself and defaulting on his own agreements with himself. He was a sneaky son of a—"

"There's always been wheeler-dealers in the cattle business," Hallam said. "You got to watch out for sharpers, no matter what you're doin'."

"Yeah. You'd think I'd know that, as old as I am."

Silently, Hallam agreed, but he didn't say anything. Johnny had always been a little gullible, but he'd done all right for himself, getting in on the ground floor of the radio industry and building a profitable operation here in Fort Worth, at least to hear his mama tell it. Then he'd run into Kenneth Ward and tried to get too rich, too fast. That was the trail to ruination most of the time, Hallam thought, and it sure had been in this case.

"Anyway, Ward turned around and sold the station to somebody else while I was still trying to straighten everything out," Johnny went on. "Shoot, I'd have gone into debt and bought it back from the new fella, only he's not interested in selling. I offered to work for him and manage the operation, but he didn't want that, either. I was out in the cold, after all I'd done to make that station what it is."

"That's mighty rough," Hallam said. "What'd you do?" He knew from talking to Sarah when she had called him in L.A. what the official version of the story was, but he wanted to hear Johnny tell it.

"I was so mad I figured that if I couldn't do anything else, at least I could take some satisfaction out of whipping Ward," Johnny said. "I tracked him down to the Four Treys, that gam-

bling club out on the Jacksboro Highway, and braced him there. We'd've had it out right there, but Buckston—that's the boss of the joint—had his boys toss us out. Ward got in his car and left, and so did I. That's the last I saw of him."

"And later that night some fellas fishin' in the Trinity below the Eagle Mountain Lake spillway found his body with a couple of forty-five-caliber slugs in the back," Hallam finished.

Johnny shook his head. "The cops think I followed him and shot him, but I didn't do it, Uncle Lucas. I swear I didn't."

Blood kin or not, the vow had the ring of truth to it. Hallam put his hands on his knees and pushed himself to his feet. "I'll poke around a mite," he said.

Johnny stood up and grabbed his hand again, pumping it. "Thanks, Uncle Lucas. I know you'll find out who really killed Ward. I've read all about those big murder cases you've cracked out in Hollywood."

"Don't believe all you read," Hallam warned him.

Sarah Reeves drove out Camp Bowie Boulevard, named after the military base that had been located west of Fort Worth back during the World War. The *First* World War, Hallam corrected himself as he thought about where they were headed. The big ruckus going on in Europe and the Pacific right now sure qualified as the second one. Hallam gave a little shake of his head. The War to End Wars . . . shoot, he could have told anybody who'd listen that it wouldn't work out that way.

This part of town wasn't open countryside anymore. Houses and businesses covered most of it, even well beyond the Trinity River. Sarah lived out here, in a neat little frame house a couple of blocks north of the brick-paved boulevard.

As shook up as she was about her son being in jail, she was still happy to have relatives visiting, Hallam knew. She fussed over him and Beth, fixing supper for them and making sure they were settled in their rooms. After they had eaten, Beth sat down cross-legged on the floor in the living room, in front of the big cathedral radio, and turned the dials until she found what she wanted. She leaned forward and listened avidly to *I Love a Mystery*. She always claimed she could figure out the stories before the characters in them did, and Hallam had to admit that most of the time she was right.

While Beth was busy, Hallam stepped into the kitchen and picked up a dish towel to dry the dishes his sister was washing.

He said, "If it's all right with you, I reckon I'll borrow your car for a while tonight."

"Did Johnny tell you anything?" Sarah asked, keeping her voice low.

"Only what he'd already told you—and the cops. He argued with Ward, all right, but then Ward drove off and Johnny didn't follow him."

"The police are convinced he did."

"Well, we'll just have to un-convince 'em."

"Of course you can use the car, Lucas. Anything you want. Anything that will help Johnny."

"I can't promise I'll do the boy a bit of good," Hallam said. "But I'll sure try."

Sarah took the dish towel out of his hands. "I'll do that. You go clear my son's name."

Hallam snagged the car keys from the hook beside the back door, put on his fedora, and slipped out of the house. Beth might be annoyed with him for leaving that way without saying goodbye, but he didn't want to waste any more time arguing with her.

Where he was going tonight was no place for a youngster.

The sign by the road was an oval that said simply "3333." That was the street number of the big, sprawling white house at the top of the hill overlooking the Jacksboro Highway. Everybody in town knew it as the Four Treys. Hallam wheeled the roadster into the driveway of the place and found a place to park in the gravel lot, which was pretty crowded. The gambling club was doing good business. Hallam heard music and laughter before he ever got inside. Some of the windows were open on this warm summer night.

The shoulders of the man standing at the door strained the fabric of the tuxedo he wore. "Lookin' for somebody, Pop?" he asked. His accent told Hallam he was either a Yankee or a Dallasite, which was about the same thing.

"Like a word with Mr. Buckston," Hallam said pleasantly.

"This is a gambling club, not a conversation parlor," the doorman said.

"So I've heard, but I don't care to gamble. Rather talk."

"Is that so? Beat it, Pop."

"I can see you like to gamble," Hallam said, still sounding mild.

The doorman frowned. "Whattaya mean?"

"You're bettin' that a big young fella like yourself's got nothin' to

fear from a feeble old coot like me. You're bettin' against the fact that even on my worst day, I could take a dozen punks like you 'fore breakfast."

The doorman's face hardened, and his hands clenched into fists. "You old bas—"

"And you're bettin' I won't haul out the hogleg I've got under this coat and put a couple of slugs right through you." Hallam moved his hand enough to make the threat seem real.

The doorman hesitated, and Hallam knew what he was thinking. The fella was trying to decide if Hallam was crazy enough to pull a gun and start blasting.

He was saved from having to make that decision by a voice that called out, "Hello, Lucas! When did you get back in town?"

The rugged-looking, white-haired man who strolled up had an air about him that said he ran the place. The doorman gestured at Hallam and asked incredulously, "You know this old gink, Mr. Buckston?"

"Sure I do." The owner of the gambling club grinned. "Come on in, Lucas. I'll buy you a drink."

Hallam started into the building with Dave Buckston, but he glanced back and said to the doorman, "The answer, son, is—Yep, I sure am."

The club had been built as a private residence, and it still served as that for Buckston and his family. The owner led Hallam to a bar and got a cold beer from the bartender for him. Hallam took a swallow, then said, "I reckon you probably know why I'm here."

Buckston nodded. The music coming from one of the other rooms, the excited talk, the laughter, the click of chips and the shuffle of cards and the rattle of the roulette wheel all blended into a background melody that was unlike anything else in the world. Over that sound, Buckston said, "You came to see about that nephew of yours."

"He says he didn't kill Ward."

Buckston shrugged. "Most murderers say they didn't do it."

"I believe Johnny. From what I hear, this fella Ward played pretty fast and loose most of the time. Sounds to me like there might've been somebody else who wanted him dead."

"I suppose Ward had other enemies," Buckston admitted. "But he played it straight here and paid up when he lost. That made him a good customer as far as I was concerned."

"But you might've heard something, Dave. . . ."

Buckston hesitated, then said with a frown, "You might look up a girl named Raeann Jordan. Society girl here in town. Father's got a lot of oil and gas money. I heard she and Ward had some kind of blowup."

"Trouble over business?"

Buckston gave a short bark of laughter. "Monkey business, I'd say."

"Thanks, Dave." Hallam drained the rest of the beer. "For the drink and for the information."

"Glad to help, Lucas. Don't get your hopes up. Could be Johnny Reeves really did kill Ward."

Hallam nodded curtly. Maybe Buckston was right—but Hallam didn't want to think about that just yet.

He would look up Raeann Jordan tomorrow, Hallam decided as he drove away from the Four Treys. The train trip from L.A. had been tiring, and he knew his thinking might be clearer if he got a good night's sleep. On the way back to Sarah's house, he turned on the radio in the Ford and found it set to the station that Johnny had owned before Kenneth Ward had swindled him out of it. Curious, Hallam listened for a few minutes. There was a program of dance music on, nothing out of the ordinary. When the number ended, an announcer came on and read the news, which these days consisted mainly of troop movements and bombardments and such-like. Hallam sighed. There were a lot of American boys overseas now, and way too many of them would never be coming home.

The announcer wrapped up the break by saying excitedly, "And tonight's special numbers are . . . 17, 39, 54, 66, 77, and 93. Keep track of those numbers, folks, and win big money!"

Hallam snorted. Radio contests were just a bunch of hoopla as far as he was concerned. Real people never won anything at them.

"And now back to our evening of music from the Casino Beach Ballroom," the announcer concluded, and the lush strains of a big band came over the airwaves again.

So far it hadn't been much of a homecoming, Hallam thought.

But he was just getting started.

Hallam figured that Raeann Jordan, being a society gal from a rich family, was probably the type who liked to sleep late. Wanting to be polite about things—at least for the time being—he decided to make another stop the next morning before he looked

her up. He headed for the radio station that had once belonged to his nephew.

He had company this time. Beth had been adamant. She loved the radio, and she was going to see what a real radio station looked like.

"I've been to some of the stations in L.A.," Hallam told her as he drove back toward downtown. The station was located on Seventh Street, not far from the river. "They're nothing special. Just buildings with a bunch of machines in them."

"I don't care," Beth said from the roadster's passenger seat. "I want to see it for myself."

That was just like her, Hallam thought. She was curious about nearly everything.

"Back when radio was just gettin' started," he said, "we called it wireless. Folks were used to bein' able to talk over telephone wires, but to be able to turn a switch on a box and hear voices and music comin' out of thin air . . . well, it was something, let me tell you."

"Golly, I don't know what I'd do without radio," Beth said, shaking her head. "It just wouldn't be the same without the Shadow, and Fibber McGee and Molly, and the Great Gildersleeve, and the Lone Ranger—"

"You could always read books," Hallam cut in, knowing that if he didn't stop her, she'd likely go on naming her favorite programs for several minutes.

"It's not the same."

Hallam didn't argue the point. He had given in and allowed Beth to come with him this morning on the condition that she would go with her Aunt Sarah to the zoo this afternoon, while Hallam kept on tending to the business that had brought them here. Beth was still a little mad about not being told the real reason for their visit until they had gotten to Fort Worth.

The radio station was a red-brick building perched on the edge of a bluff overlooking the Trinity River. The ground floor faced Seventh Street, but there was a lower floor built on the side of the bluff. Hallam parked in the small lot and took Beth inside.

A young receptionist with a hairstyle patterned after the Andrews Sisters took them to an office in the rear of the building after speaking on the phone for a moment. Their route led them along a hallway, and on both sides of the corridor were large windows. Through the glass, Hallam and Beth could see the equipment that kept the station on the air and sent its signal out to the

world. Hallam had never seen so many dials and gauges and glowing lights. There were also several studios with big microphones on floor stands. Beth stared at them, wide-eyed with awe. When they reached the window that looked into a studio where an announcer was reading the farm and ranch report, Hallam had to practically drag Beth away. A small red light was burning over the door into the studio, reminding Hallam of the movie sets in Hollywood, where a red light also indicated that something important was going on inside.

A tall, slender man with a shock of fair hair was waiting for them in the office. He stood up, extended his hand across a paper-cluttered desk, and said, "Mr. Hallam? I'm William Gruber, the owner and general manager." His voice had a faint accent.

Hallam shook hands with the man and said, "This is my daughter Beth."

"Hello, Beth," Gruber said with a smile. "Are you interested in radio?"

"You bet," Beth replied. "I mean, yes, sir, I am."

"Janice," Gruber said to the receptionist, "why don't you give Beth a tour of the station?"

"All right, Mr. Gruber," the young woman said with a nod.

Beth looked at Hallam. "Can I, Lucas?"

"Go ahead," he told her. The discussion he planned to have with Gruber wasn't really meant for the ears of a little girl anyway.

When Beth and the receptionist had left, Hallam said, "I understand you bought this station from Kenneth Ward."

"That is correct," Gruber said in precise tones. "And Ward took it over from your nephew, John Reeves, after a failed business arrangement between them."

Hallam frowned. "How'd you know I'm Johnny's uncle?"

"I make it a point to know the things that may affect my business. In this case, after you called this morning and requested an appointment to see me, I took the liberty of phoning an acquaintance at the *Star-Telegram*. He told me quite a bit about you, Mr. Hallam. There was a time when you were something of a celebrity in this town."

"A long time ago," Hallam said.

Gruber shrugged slightly and made a gesture with a well-manicured hand. "I assume you have come to Fort Worth because of the trouble your nephew is in."

"That's right. He didn't kill Ward. But I'm going to find out who did."

"An admirable goal," Gruber said. "I wish you luck. But I don't know how I can help you. I didn't know Ward well, and I never even met John Reeves."

"How did you come to buy this station from Ward?" Hallam asked bluntly.

"I had been looking for an investment opportunity in the communications field. Ward initially approached one of the companies that owns several other stations in this area, intending to sell to it. However, that company is not in the market for any more stations at the moment, so the man with whom Ward spoke—who is an acquaintance of mine—suggested that he talk to me instead." Again Gruber gave his elegant little shrug. "A fortuitous meeting for all involved. Ward made a tidy profit on the sale. Of course, it didn't save his life later."

"Money won't stop a forty-five slug," Hallam said. "You know anybody else who might've wanted Ward dead?"

"I know of no one at all. My dealings with him were brief and strictly business. I'm told, however, that he was something of a shady character. I'm certain that if you continue digging, you will find what you need to know. I wish you luck."

Gruber stood, indicating that the conversation was over. Hallam got to his feet as well, but before leaving the office, he said, "There's one more thing I'd like to know, but I don't want to insult you, Mr. Gruber."

"Go ahead and ask your question, whatever it may be, Mr. Hallam. I assure you I will not be insulted."

"All right," Hallam said. "With everything that's goin' on in Europe right now, this ain't a very good time to have a German name. Has it affected your business?"

"It might if I allowed my connection with the station to become common knowledge. But the owner of record is my corporation, Paragon Communications, and William Gruber is only a stockholder."

"You're hidin' behind a phony name, then?"

Gruber's mouth tightened a little. "I would not say hiding, Mr. Hallam. Merely being circumspect. My involvement with the company is a matter of public record, if anyone cares to delve into it."

Hallam nodded. "All right. Like I said, I didn't mean no offense. One of my best pals out in Hollywood is a fella named Charlie Gebhardt. You probably know him as Buck Jones."

Gruber raised an eyebrow in surprise as Hallam left the office.

Hallam found Beth and the receptionist in one of the studios.

Beth was pretending to be an announcer and talking into one of the big microphones. She grinned at Hallam and said, "Look, Lucas, I'm on the radio."

"Sure you are, honey. You ready to go?"

"I guess," Beth said reluctantly. She turned to the receptionist. "Bye, Janice."

When they were in the car again, Beth turned to Hallam and said solemnly, "Did you know that fella Mr. Gruber is a Nazi spy?"

Hallam frowned and looked at her in surprise. "What in blazes makes you think that?"

"Well, he's a German, isn't he? He looks like Conrad Veidt. He's one of those Fifth Columnists, and he's sending out coded messages to other Nazi spies. I heard them on the radio last night."

"You're talkin' about that contest," Hallam said as understanding dawned. "Those special numbers folks're supposed to remember."

"Code," Beth said smugly. "I'm going to keep listening, and I'll figure out what they're up to. I'll bet they're planning some sort of sabotage."

"Maybe so," Hallam said, trying not to chuckle. William Gruber had struck him as a pretty cold-blooded businessman, but a Nazi spy? Hallam didn't think so.

He dropped Beth off at Sarah's house, over the girl's objections. Beth would keep her part of the bargain, and Hallam would go see Raeann Jordan, who according to Dave Buckston had been the murdered man's girlfriend.

The girl's family lived not far from Colonial Country Club, which sprawled along the Trinity southwest of downtown Fort Worth. It was a neighborhood of huge houses with big lawns and tall shade trees. Hallam found the one he was looking for and drove up a circular driveway to park Sarah's roadster under a fancy porte-cochere.

A woman in a maid's uniform answered Hallam's knock on the mahogany front door. He tugged his fedora off and said, "I'd like to see Miss Raeann Jordan if I might, ma'am."

The maid frowned. "Do you have an appointment with Miss Raeann?"

"No, ma'am, I don't, but I was hoping she'd give me a few minutes of her time. My name's Lucas Hallam, and I'd like to speak to her about a fella named Kenneth Ward."

From the look in her eyes, the maid recognized Ward's name, all right. She also didn't look as if she thought letting Hallam into the

house would be a good idea. But then a man's voice asked from somewhere behind her, "Who is it, Alice?"

"Some old gentleman who wants to see Miss Raeann, sir," the maid said over her shoulder.

She stepped back and opened the door wider as a thick-bodied man with graying hair, a neatly trimmed moustache, and glasses came up to the entrance. He was wearing a sweater and carried a newspaper in one hand. "I'm Alvin Jordan," he said to Hallam. "Perhaps I can help you. Raeann is my daughter."

"Maybe so," Hallam said. "I want to ask Miss Jordan a few questions about Kenneth Ward."

Jordan's face, barely affable to start with, lost any hint of hospitality as it hardened into a mask. "My daughter has nothing to say about that man or his death. The police have already questioned her, and she told them everything she knew about Ward, which was absolutely nothing. Now, if there's nothing else—" Jordan reached for the door, obviously intending to shut it in Hallam's face.

"Now, Daddy, you know that's not true."

Hallam looked past Jordan and saw a young woman coming down a curving staircase. She wore a simple dress but managed somehow to make it look like an elegant gown. Her hair was such a pale blond that it was almost silver.

"I'm dealing with this, Raeann," Jordan told her, but she ignored him, coming straight to the door when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"My father disapproved of my relationship with Ken," she said to Hallam. "He'd like to pretend that it never existed. What did you say your name is?"

"Lucas Hallam, ma'am."

"Goodbye, Mr. Hallam," Jordan said curtly.

Raeann continued to ignore her father. "Come in, Mr. Hallam," she said, stepping forward to take Hallam's arm. "I'd be glad to talk to you."

Jordan looked completely exasperated, but he moved aside and let Raeann lead Hallam into the house. She took him to a parlor and set him down on a fancy sofa, settling herself beside him. Her father sat in an armchair on the other side of the room, rattled his newspaper a few times in disapproval, then retreated behind it. Hallam thought he had this relationship figured out: Raeann Jordan did just about whatever she pleased, and though her father might grump around about it, he never really tried to stop her.

Hallam wondered how long the girl's mother had been dead. A good while, he guessed.

"Now, tell me what you want to know, Mr. Hallam. Are you a reporter of some kind?"

"No, ma'am. I'm a private detective. But more'n that, I'm Johnny Reeves's uncle."

That got through Raeann's pose of languid indifference. "The man the police say shot Ken?"

"That's right. I don't believe he did it, so I'm trying to find out who might have."

Raeann lifted a hand to her breast. "You can't possibly think that I—"

"You tell me, ma'am," Hallam said coolly.

That brought a response from Alvin Jordan. "See here!" he said sharply, lowering his paper. "No matter who you are, you can't come in here and start accusing my daughter of killing someone!"

"Oh, hush, Daddy," Raeann said. She looked at Hallam. "I didn't shoot Ken. I couldn't have. I loved him. Besides, I was at a party that evening, and a hundred and fifty people saw me there."

She was mighty handy with that alibi, Hallam thought, but what she said sounded true. He looked over at Jordan and asked bluntly, "What about you?"

"What do you mean?" Jordan said.

"You didn't like your daughter bein' mixed up with a shady character like Ward. Maybe you did something about it."

"This is insane!" Jordan exclaimed.

"Ken wasn't a shady character!" Raeann added.

Hallam wasn't going to argue that point with her. There was too much evidence to the contrary to worry about what she thought of Ward. But he was still waiting for Jordan's answer, and after a moment the oilman said, "I was at the same party as my daughter, if you must know."

"All right," Hallam said with a nod, accepting what Jordan had told him. "But you knew Ward pretty well, Miss Jordan. Was there anybody else you know of who had a reason to want him dead?"

"I had nothing to do with Ken's business affairs," Raeann answered quickly. "Our relationship was strictly social."

"But maybe he said something sometime that made you wonder," Hallam prodded.

Raeann frowned in concentration. "Well, there was one time when Ken seemed upset about something. He wouldn't say much

except that he wasn't going to let anyone double-cross him."

"Did you tell the police that?"

She shook her head. "They didn't ask. They just wanted to know if John Reeves had ever threatened Ken while I was around. I told them the truth, that I had seen the two of them arguing at the Four Treys." Raeann shrugged her slender shoulders. "But that's all I know."

"There," Jordan snapped. "Are you satisfied now?"

Not particularly, Hallam thought, but he figured he had gotten about all he was going to out of the Jordans. He stood up and said, "I'll be goin', I reckon. But if you think of anything else that might help me, Miss Jordan—"

"I won't. That's everything, Mr. Hallam. Honestly."

Hallam wasn't sure, but for now he was willing to let it go. No point in putting them on their guard by saying that he might be back later to ask them more questions.

Jordan showed Hallam out himself, rather than summoning the maid, as if he wanted to see with his own eyes that the unwelcome visitor was gone. As Hallam drove away, he thought about what he had learned so far today, which wasn't much. He could see why the cops had settled on Johnny as the killer. There might be speculation about Ward's other business dealings, but there was good solid evidence that Johnny had hated him and had in fact argued with him shortly before his death.

Maybe Beth had something with that Nazi spy business. If Gruber was a Fifth Columnist, and if Ward had found out and threatened to expose him . . .

Hallam chuckled and shook his head. He was grasping at straws now, and he knew it. He reached over and turned on the radio to clear his mind.

Then his eyes narrowed, and for a moment he didn't even see the road in front of him. He was too busy thinking. . . .

By late that afternoon, he had all the information he needed. It had taken some digging in the morgue of the *Star-Telegram*, as well as picking the brain of the reporter who was currently on the police beat. The man knew of Hallam by reputation and was glad to talk to him in return for the promise of an exclusive.

Hallam was listening to the radio station as he parked in front of it. *The Shadow* was just about to begin, and the music from a Blue Coal commercial was playing as Hallam shut off the engine. He could have used Lamont Cranston right about now, he thought

as he walked into the building. The power to cloud men's minds had to come in mighty handy sometimes. Hallam didn't have that ability.

But after all these years, he sure as hell knew about the evil that lurked in the hearts of men. . . .

The pretty young receptionist was already gone for the day. Hallam headed down the hall toward William Gruber's office. Before he got there, he spotted Gruber through a big window that looked into one of the studios. The red light over the door wasn't on, and the radio drama that was coming softly from the speakers mounted on the wall of the corridor was more proof that the mikes inside the studio weren't live. Hallam opened the door.

Gruber had a sheaf of papers in his hand, probably a programming schedule, from the looks of it. He glanced up from what he was doing and said in surprise, "Why, Mr. Hallam, what brings you back here?"

"Came to see you, Mr. Gruber," Hallam said as he shut the door. "I need to ask you some more questions."

"About Kenneth Ward? I don't know what else I can tell you."

Hallam leaned a hip against one of the studio consoles and placed his fedora down so that it covered several of the dials and switches. "Well, when I was here this morning, you didn't say anything about bein' Ward's partner in the cattle business."

Gruber frowned. "That's because I wasn't. I'm in the radio business, Mr. Hallam. I know nothing about cows."

"You sure? There's good money to be made in cattle. That's why folks steal 'em."

"You're speaking of what? Rustling? Isn't that what they call it on the radio plays and in the movies?" Gruber laughed. "That was in the old days, wasn't it?"

"It's still goin' on," Hallam said. "For example, Ward had four trucks full of cattle hijacked in the month before his death. He was bringin' 'em to Fort Worth to sell 'em in the stockyards, but they never got here. Hijackers hit the trucks on the highways into town, no matter where they were comin' from. One of 'em was headin' up U.S. 67 from Stephenville, another was on 281 comin' down from Bowie. Then there was a truck lost on Highway 80 west o' here, and another on 77 comin' down from the north. Ward owned all of 'em through a series of dummy companies. None of that's public knowledge, but the cops found out about it when they went through his records after he was killed. Took some diggin', but I found out, too."

Gruber looked bored and annoyed. "I have work to do, Mr. Hallam, and while this is certainly interesting, it has nothing to do with me. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"I figure Ward had a silent partner in all those deals," Hallam went on, as if Gruber hadn't spoken. "And that partner double-crossed him by tippin' off a gang when and where they could hit a shipment of Ward's cattle. That partner was you, Gruber."

Now the station owner was more than annoyed. He was mad. "I'm going to call the police if you don't leave," he said.

"I'll go soon enough," Hallam said. He gestured at the notes in Gruber's hand. "Figurin' out the special numbers for that contest you're runnin'? Reckon you've got to keep it up for a while and actually give a little money away so that nobody will know you were really usin' it to send messages to the fellas who were stealin' Ward's cattle for you."

Gruber stared hard at him for a moment, then said, "Are you actually accusing me of using that silly contest to send secret messages? My God, the next thing you'll be saying is that I'm some sort of Nazi spy!"

"Well, now that you mention it—" Hallam began, then shook his head. "Nope, you're not a Fifth Columnist, Gruber. Just a cheap crook and a double-crosser and a killer. The cops'll prove it, too, once I show them all the connections and they start diggin'. You might as well fess up now."

Gruber drew a deep breath and turned to set the papers on a table. When he turned back to face Hallam, there was a little pistol in his hand. A curse in his native tongue came from between his clenched teeth.

"No one will believe you," he said. "My ties to Ward are too well concealed. You will be taken for a foolish old man so desperate to save his nephew from the electric chair that you have concocted this whole mad story. If I let you walk out of here."

Hallam seemed as nonchalant as he had been all along, leaning on the console as if nobody was pointing a gun at him. He said, "I reckon you and Ward have been partners for quite a while, runnin' all sorts of shady deals on folks. Ain't that right?"

Gruber shrugged. "Ward was a good salesman, a smooth talker. He could travel in circles in which I could not, especially with the war going on. But I provided most of the ideas and capital for our partnership. It was only fair that most of the profits should be mine, too."

"Even if you had to steal 'em from Ward?"

"You have no proof of any of this." Again, Gruber took a deep breath, and he lowered the pistol. "Go on, Mr. Hallam. Spread your ridiculous rumors. Harass me all you want. You may damage my reputation and my business for a time, but in the end you will accomplish nothing."

Hallam shook his head. "Reckon I've already accomplished something," he said. "I've broadcast you confessin' to anybody who's listenin' to this radio station of yours." He lifted his hat and pointed to the switch he had thrown when he started talking. "I'll bet folks think they just tuned in late to another episode of *The Shadow*. Damned if I'm goin' to try to do the fella's laugh, though."

Gruber's eyes widened in horror and rage, and the gun in his hand came up again. Before he could pull the trigger, Hallam flicked the fedora at his face. Gruber flinched, and Hallam followed the hat with a big fist, slamming it into Gruber's jaw at the same time he batted the gun aside with his other hand. Gruber sailed backward, knocking over a couple of microphones, and sprawled on the floor of the studio in a tangle of mike stands. Hallam picked up the fallen gun and stepped back. He straightened one of the stands and said into the microphone, "Testin', one-two-three-four. Somebody out there want to call the cops?"

"I heard the whole thing, Lucas!" Beth said excitedly as Hallam came into the house later that night, a grateful Johnny Reeves with him. While Sarah embraced her son, Beth grabbed hold of Hallam's hand and asked, "Did Gruber try to shoot you?"

"He might have, if I'd given him the chance," Hallam said. "Figured it'd be better not to."

"I told you he was a bad guy!"

"You said he was a spy," Hallam pointed out.

"Well, maybe I was wrong about that. But what I said this morning helped you figure it all out, didn't it?"

"Reckon it did," Hallam admitted.

"Then you ought to hire me to help you in the private eye business."

Hallam tried not to roll his eyes. "That'll be the day."

Beth gave him a mock glare. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it, maybe I'll be a writer and write mysteries for the radio, since I'm so good at figuring things out. How about that, Lucas? Would you rather me be a writer or a private eye?"

Hallam frowned and didn't say anything.

He was going to have to think long and hard about *that* one. ●

SLOW BURN

by Gwen Moffat

Whether or not you believe in original sin, Darren Jones never stood a chance. It didn't seem that way at the time. For nearly a year he appeared to hold the whip hand because, terrified of retaliation, Mrs. Tilney didn't dare protest. It became so bad you started to wonder what she would do if driven beyond endurance.

Thirza Tilney had her hostages to fortune: her cherished cat, and the cabin from which she watched the sea-birds that nested on the cliffs

below the coast-guard station. She was old, turned seventy, small and frail, and she'd depended on her husband for everything: from changing a light bulb to paying the bills, and for emotional support. Darren had his father for protection, a lumbering bear of a man, who drank. Thirza had had her husband and she'd clung to him like ivy to a wall.

Charles Tilney was a solicitor, and although not an unkind man, he couldn't always conceal his impatience with his wife. We have our share of eccentrics in this remote corner of Wales: dog breeders, horsey women, lone retirees who've been in positions of authority. Charles met a number of these in his practice and Thirza, more a shadow of himself than an individual in her own right, would make a poor showing in contrast.

Charles died: a heart attack in the cabin while he was watching his beloved birds—for it was Charles who was the ornithologist; Thirza maintained she was only a bird-watcher. She went to the cabin because he did, although on the one occasion I was there with

"Landscape is an important component in the work of Gwen Moffat," said the authors of *By a Woman's Hand*. This is no less true in her short stories than in the 20 crime novels she has penned, many featuring Miss Pink, a heroine as formidable as the narrator of this story. Ms. Moffat lives in the English Lake District and travels in the western U.S. †

the two of them he ignored her—not pointedly, it was just that he was more interested in the birds. But he was alone when he died. Thirza felt guilty about that. Afterwards she continued to go to the cabin. “It’s a comfort,” she told me. “I feel him all around me there.”

I was the only person she confided in, but then I’m a good listener. A hospital matron has to be. I knew my nurses called me a Rottweiler behind my back, but I’ve mellowed in retirement. There’s no longer any need to assert my authority except on rare occasions with impertinent tradesmen or small boys. I never had any trouble with Darren Jones. Thirza, looking for a substitute, would have become as dependent on me as she’d been on Charles, if I’d allowed it, so I was careful. I saw to it that she came to my cottage only on invitation and I didn’t go to the cabin on the cliff at all. I preferred to watch birds from the old coast-guard lookout. In any event, it was bright and airy; I found the cabin claustrophobic.

Charles had built his retreat on a point above a cove, and the structure faced the cliffs below the coast-guard station. The lookout, sited on the opposite point, gave the reciprocal view: the cliffs below the cabin. The cabin was little more than a hide really, with slit openings which were closed by shutters when no one was in occupation. My feeling of claustrophobia started the very first time I went there. Charles was alive then and Thirza had been with us. It was a blustery day with an offshore wind, and the cabin moved alarmingly, straining against the cables that secured it to the bedrock. Charles closed the door when we entered, but after we’d been observing the ranks of auks for a few minutes, through the noise of wind and birds I heard a soft *clack!* from the direction of the door. I turned.

“Only the drop bar,” Charles said carelessly. “It’s fallen into the holder.”

“It’s how we keep the door shut when we leave,” Thirza explained.

“How do we get out?”

“Ah!” She was coy. “Shall we tell her, Charles?”

He was concentrating on a colony of razorbills and he didn’t lower the binoculars. “Of course, you tell her! How’s she going to get out if it happens when she’s in here on her own?”

“I didn’t think of that.” She reached up to the ledge above the door and produced a rusty table knife. Inserting it in the crack between door and jamb, she prised up the bar and the door opened. She replaced the knife and the door closed again under pressure from the east wind. A moment later a gust shook the cabin and I heard the bar drop.

"I'll never come here on my own," I said flatly. "Suppose a tourist—or some child—came in and took the knife?"

"No one ever comes here except us," Charles was quite casual about it.

"You ought to carry your own knife," Thirza said. "I do." She saw my surprise. "Charles insists on it," she explained. "So useful. You can cut the sheep free, for instance; they're always getting hung up in the brambles." And she pulled a Swiss Army knife from the pocket of her parka. I was amused. Thirza Tilney armed with a lethal weapon!

After Charles's death we rallied round her, particularly the elderly among us, and no doubt she thought that, with so many men on hand, they would go some way towards filling the gap, at least where material assistance was concerned. She hadn't made friends of her own, these were Charles's associates, but even intimates would have tried to persuade her to stand on her own feet eventually, once the period of grieving was over.

She hadn't a clue about the most mundane matters; she needed help with her income-tax returns, with insurance forms, with selling the car. That was another problem: She couldn't drive, and she wouldn't ride a bicycle because she was terrified of tractors in our narrow lanes. If she didn't catch the bus she depended on other people to take her to town. As for the cabin, which was over a mile from the village, she walked there. It was a pleasant enough walk, across little fields with flowery banks in spring. The fields stopped before the sea cliffs, and the cabin was approached across a stretch of moor, the haunt of curlews and other ground-nesting birds.

The months that followed Charles's death saw a deterioration in Thirza. She started to let herself go. She still went out to the cliffs and fussed about the garden but I felt that she kept up these interests because of their association with Charles. In her person she became—well, slovenly. She didn't keep her house clean, and as for her clothes: her cuffs and collars were frayed, her boots caked with mud, and I don't think there was a pocket in her parka that didn't have holes. She was always shedding things through the holes.

As Charles's friends dropped away, she was forced to employ handymen to do the jobs around the place that Charles had done as a matter of course. There was the tendency to attach herself to me, which I discouraged, trying to chivvy her gently into pulling herself together, to take up the reins again, live sensibly like other solitary women. Naturally I was careful not to imply that if I

could do it, so could she, but in any case I had no success.

She continued to frequent the cliffs so at least she was involved with the natural world. From the coast-guard station I would look down on the cabin and see the shutters were open, so I'd know she was inside. Occasionally, walking back to the village, she would overtake me—I am a little short-winded and she was a fast walker. I took to returning home by a different path. I found her something of a trial—and now she was becoming paranoid about the children.

Charles had been a keen gardener: flowers, fruit, vegetables. There were drystone walls between his garden and the pasture at the back. The children climbed the wall, she said, and picked all the strawberries. Eventually they broke the wall down and sheep came through the gap. Drystone walling is expensive so she had the gap fenced, and every time she looked out of a back window she was reminded of the children's depredations. She said they were led by Darren Jones, which was highly likely. He was ten years old at the time and would serve as a role model for younger boys. If a gate were opened and cows got in a garden, trampling lawns, eating the flowers, Darren was the chosen suspect, but no one voiced his suspicions. It was holiday cottages belonging to English people that were targeted, and Darren's dad was vehemently opposed to rich incomers. In our part of Wales you stay on the right side of men like Hughie Jones. Arson is their favoured weapon.

Darren was a beautiful child. There was no other word to describe him. Not "engaging" or "enchanted," because the wide blue eyes could go cold as a goat's. But the cherubic features were there: the corn-blond hair, the chiselled lips—he had his looks from his mother, who resembled a Botticelli madonna when she wasn't bruised by her husband's fists. However, if Darren were crossed, something moved behind those bleak eyes that made even me catch my breath.

Charles Tilney died in the spring. As the year progressed his widow became obsessed with Darren. I visited her out of a sense of duty, but not often; a house is too intimate, a place where things are confided that should stay secret. Alas, a car can be intimate too, but there was no way I could pass the bus stop when people were waiting there to go to town. If there was more than one it was all right, but if it happened that Thirza was alone I felt as if I had the Ancient Mariner sitting beside me, except that Thirza's albatross was very much alive.

Darren had trampled Charles's delphiniums. He had thrown dirt at her bedsheets on the line. In the autumn he stole her

apples; with the first fall of snow he threw a snowball at her kitchen window and there must have been a stone inside it because he broke a pane.

"You wouldn't consider having a word with his father?" I suggested after this last offence. Immediately she retracted, asserting that she could have been mistaken, that it might not have been Darren every time, perhaps any time; her eyes weren't so good any longer. (She could distinguish a razorbill from a guillemot on the other side of the cove.) No way would she approach Hughie Jones. In the circumstances, I wouldn't either, not because I was frightened of the fellow but simply because any complaint made on her behalf would exacerbate matters. Darren would understand that she was terrified and be inspired to greater mischief.

Matters came to a head nearly a year after Charles died. I was watering my houseplants when Thirza crept past my window, her head averted, one hand to her face. It was my day for Avril, the girl who cleans for me. "What's wrong with Mrs. Tilney?" I asked at our midmorning break, "Toothache? She looked odd going by."

"Oh, don't take no notice." Avril was dismissive. "He never meant no harm. She imagines things."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Well, you know that young Darren—but he's a *good* boy, Miss Roberts; she just fell down, he never touched her." She stopped. I waited. "And the radio!" she resumed fiercely. "Just fiddling with it, wasn't he? Didn't know the old lady were in the house. He wanted to hear the football on the radio, you know what boys are."

"He went to her house to steal her radio?"

"Never! Not *steal*. He's a good boy."

"And she caught him in the act—and he knocked her down?"

"He panicked. He thought she'd gone out and forgot to lock up. Time was when we didn't lock our doors. Things have changed, what with the summer visitors and all. He went in—you do when you're calling, don't you? And he looked around . . ."

"And spotted the radio."

Avril pursed her lips. "You don't want to believe everything that one tells you," she said tightly, meaning I shouldn't believe anything Thirza told me. "What happened was she was upstairs having a lie-down and she come down and she were between him and the door so he panicked and pushed past her and he forgot he still had a hold of the radio, and he dropped it, and she hit her head against the sideboard."

Her nose was broken. As I discovered when I made it my business to visit the health centre later that day. Thirza had attended for treatment, but she was adamant that she had fallen, and she never mentioned that a thief had been in her house. I did. It was a good idea to warn people that he was now using violence; it could be worse next time, as it gets worse with battered wives. Now we had children battering old-age pensioners. Never mind that she could have fallen because he pushed past her; that was as bad, and it could be the thin end of the wedge. Thirza wasn't so paranoid after all.

I called on her when I came back from town. She didn't like my visiting at that moment. I didn't think she was embarrassed at my seeing her with a dressing on her nose, I thought she was terrified. Several times she glanced towards her cat, a red marmalade tom that she treated like family.

"Shall I open the door?" I asked. "Cooper wants to go out."

"I'm keeping him in," she said quickly. "He's off-colour. I don't want him wandering."

I stared at her. She wouldn't meet my eye. "Did Darren make threats?" I asked. It's a popular taunt among naughty boys: "You've got a cat, haven't you?" Said with an evil smirk.

Thirza was shaking her head miserably. "Let me speak to his mother," I urged. "Or his teacher."

"No, no, *please*. It'll only make things worse."

She was right, of course. And she wouldn't bring charges of assault, and nothing was done. The neighbours rationalised, convincing themselves that since she wouldn't do anything, then she had indeed fallen down. It was all her fault, startling the boy, creeping downstairs unexpectedly so that he panicked and knocked the radio over. He was only visiting, after all.

He came visiting again. Someone talked, probably someone at the health centre. The story came back to the village that I'd said Darren had been caught in the act of stealing Mrs. Tilney's radio and he'd hit her. No one dared approach me, but Thirza's cat disappeared.

Thirza was stony-faced, obdurate. She said it was no use looking for Cooper, she'd never find him. I guessed she didn't want to find him, didn't want to know what had happened to him. I was raging, and coming down the street from her house, I saw Darren outside my cottage, eyeing it thoughtfully. I lost all sense of caution.

"No good," I snapped. "I don't have a cat, or a dog. And hospital matrons know more ways of killing without being found out than

you could think up in a month of Sundays."

His head jerked. He wanted to say he didn't believe me but I saw his doubt. I glared at him and switched my attention to his hands. No scratches. Perhaps he'd used some kind of club. I hated that boy. I wondered how Thirza could be so stoical. Perhaps she felt that she had nothing else to lose now. She adored that cat.

I didn't see her for two days and then she sought me out. An old shirt soaked in petrol had been put through her letter box. That was all, it hadn't been followed by a match. But Darren had just stopped her in the street and said wasn't it shocking that now school was out for the Easter holidays those children were setting the moors afire. Wicked children, he said, bored they were, with nothing to do: kids looking around for mischief. Next thing we knew they'd be putting rags soaked in petrol through folks' letter boxes in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep, and following it up with a match. Someone was going to get hurt. "But," Thirza said bleakly, "he said I had nothing to fear, he'd take care of me. He knew where I lived."

I shuddered at the phrase: culled from television, used in earnest. "You have to go to the police," I told her. "I'll come with you."

I don't think she heard me; she was following her own trail: "I just hope he doesn't set fire to the moor on top of the cliffs," she said. "All those nests: wheatears, larks, curlews. And the cabin's not insured."

"He'd never dare!" But I knew he would, as soon as he thought of it. It was becoming a seasonal pastime among young children: setting fire to moorland during the Easter break. But still Thirza wouldn't go to the police, perhaps thinking that if she did, the rag pushed through her letter box *would* be followed by a match, like he said.

Easter Monday was cool and misty, the cloud so low that you thought you had an eye problem until you realised the intermittent specks were gulls appearing and disappearing above your head. The light was good for bird-watching, however: no glare, and there was only the faintest onshore breeze. I walked out to the coast-guard station.

I watched the birds for a while, ate a sandwich, went for a walk, looked for seals. It was a curiously soft day and I lost myself in a world of water, air, and rock. There were rafts of auks on the sea, and cormorants beating fast across the surface. "Wee black devils," Charles had called them. I remembered that he had died on Easter Monday. I guessed Thirza would come out to the cabin today.

I strolled back to the coast-guard station and into mist. It seemed to be a combination of sea fog and low cloud, and eerie beyond words there on top of the cliffs. Acoustics were distorted and I seemed to be surrounded by noise. There was no swell running and yet surf smashed randomly on rock far below, while through the crooning from a thousand feathered throats came piercing cries: gulls mostly, sometimes screaming. The screams made the hair rise on the back of my neck, what with the fog and the absence of wind and me all alone up there in the old coast-guard station.

In fact, there was a slight breeze. A window appeared in the mist, allowing me a glimpse of wrinkled water, the stream of the current marked by trails of foam. Birds were scurrying back and forth through a flare of sunlight. Somewhere a breaker burst with a muffled thud. The cabin was still obscured. I doubted that Thirza was there. Perhaps she'd been and gone, intimidated by the lack of visibility and those screams. The gulls must be bothered about something. I wondered if there were a peregrine falcon about. I'd never known a peregrine on these cliffs and I felt a twinge of excitement, waiting for the cloud to lift again so that I might discover what was bothering the birds. Curiously, it was only the gulls that were alarmed, and after a while they settled down and then there was only the busy chorus of the auks. I smelled heather smoke. The children were at it again.

The breeze strengthened. Seaward, the cloud melted suddenly and the sun came blazing through. There was a band of cumulus above the Irish mountains. The islands where the puffins breed looked close enough to touch—and across the cove the cabin was on fire.

My first thought was that at least the birds were safe, the cliffs wouldn't be touched, and as for the moor, which was also alight, the ground-nesters would escape and their eggs were not yet hatched. More would be laid.

The cabin must have been burning for some time; flames were streaming back before the onshore breeze and even as I watched, the roof fell in. The fire in the heather was less dramatic, in fact—I stared in amazement: there was an untouched section between the cabin and the smoking moor. Two fires had been set.

The mist still lingered inland so I could see no sign of children; they'd be well away by now, probably on mountain bikes. There was nothing I could do except get home as fast as possible, call the fire department, and hope they'd save some of the moor. The cabin

was gone; it was roofed with some kind of tarred sheeting and was burning like an oil blaze.

I heard the fire siren before I reached the village. I shunned the task of telling Thirza and sneaked past her cottage like a criminal, hoping she was in the kitchen at the back. Once in my own place, I poured myself a stiff whisky to try to subdue the rage I felt against fire-raisers—or was it just one? I remembered Darren's threat to Thirza: "I know where you live." I wondered if she could be persuaded to move house.

The police came to me that evening. Someone had seen me return from the direction of the cliffs. The body of a child had been found in the ruins of the cabin. There was a bike outside in the heather. His father identified it as Darren's. Darren himself couldn't be identified until they had his dental records.

The little I could tell them only confirmed their theory. Darren had set two fires, had taken a petrol can inside the cabin, and the door had blown shut and the bar dropped. Thirza had told the police about the old kitchen knife but Darren wouldn't have known about that. They did find the partially melted remains of a Swiss Army knife, so he could have had the right idea, but the blades were closed; he hadn't had time to use it to open the door. And the viewing slots were too narrow for even a small boy to escape that way.

The police were surprised that I hadn't heard anything. "I could have," I said, "but the gulls were making such a racket, screaming—" And then I realised it wasn't the gulls that had been screaming.

Hughie Jones said his son didn't own a Swiss Army knife. "He would say that," Thirza said. "Mine disappeared the day he broke my nose."

She didn't rebuild the cabin. She sold her cottage to an English family for some inflated sum and moved into a luxury apartment in town. I visited her when she was settled and found her much improved. She was a different woman, far more outgoing in this light and airy flat above the harbour: neatly dressed, and she'd even had her hair styled. A red marmalade cat dozed on the window sill.

"Why, you've found a cat just like Cooper," I exclaimed.

"That is Cooper, dear."

"I thought—didn't you think—"

"I put him in a cattery when Darren told me what could happen to a cat that strayed."

"But you could never have him back while Darren—while he lived in the same village."

"While he lived," she amended. "He was a good boy," she added, raising an eyebrow as a gull screamed close by, startling Cooper. Her tone mimicked the local accent.

"He was evil," I said firmly. "A kind of justice was done out there on the cliffs. No way do I go along with the coroner and his verdict of accidental death—although I agree with his rider about the dangers of children playing with fire."

"Justice?" she repeated.

"The door would slam shut only in an offshore wind," I said. "And it was the cabin shaking in a gust that made the bar drop. There was only a light breeze that day, and it was onshore."

After a while she said, "He wouldn't have burned to death. He'd have been unconscious before the flames reached him."

"Smoke inhalation?"

"Something like that." She smiled. "I'll put the kettle on and we'll have a nice cup of tea."

She could have been speaking the truth to the best of her knowledge. She may have left him unconscious, and she'd been too far away to hear his screams when he recovered. How had she done it? Lured him out there by dropping well-placed hints that the cabin wasn't insured, known he was following her, waited inside with a raised weapon (something wooden, something that would burn), spilled the petrol, struck the match? She'd made a mistake, dropping the Swiss Army knife through a ragged pocket. She'd remedied the mistake superbly. Darren had stolen it.

She came in with the tea tray.

"How did Darren carry a petrol can in broad daylight without being seen?" I asked.

"He didn't. It was already there. He must have taken it there in the dark."

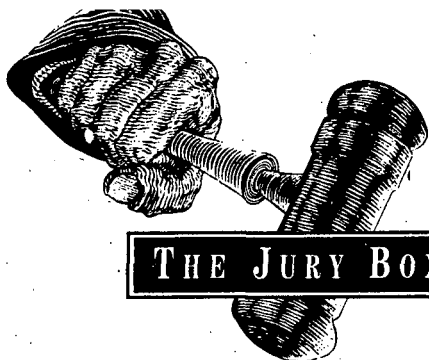
"So why wouldn't he set fire to the cabin then?"

"He wanted me inside, dear. He thought he had his chance. Stupid boy. But then all criminals are stupid, aren't they?"

"No. Just the ones who get caught."

Our eyes locked. That we had the same thought was obvious from her next words. "There's no proof, and you won't talk. Suppose you did? A senile old woman suggested a fantasy about turning the tables on a naughty boy. That's all."

She was right. She had changed out of all recognition—but of course it was Darren who had changed her: uttering his threats, looking at her cat with his cold goat's eyes, never realising that he was being measured for size by a tigress. ●



THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

The pulps, fragile and disposable fiction magazines printed on cheap paper, peaked between 1920 and 1950. Writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler gave them the patina of legend, and Quentin Tarrantino's remarkable film *Pulp Fiction* generated a fresh spurt of interest. But were the pulps as terrific as reputed?

Editors Ed Gorman, Bill Pronzini, and Martin H. Greenberg, introducing the 550-page trade paperback anthology *American Pulp* (Carroll & Graf, \$12.95), note that "most pulp fiction was cliché-filled and God-awful." Thus, they have included few stories actually from pulps—far more appeared in the vastly superior digests, including *EQMM*, *AHMM*, and the great '50s magazine *Manhunt*. The selections—from authors as various as Evan Hunter, Marcia Muller, Vin Packer, John Lutz,

Jack Ritchie, Leigh Brackett, Richard S. Prather, William Campbell Gault, Craig Rice, and Clark Howard—are excellent, as are the notes that precede them. Also worth seeking (and also drawing more from the digests than the pulps) is a hardcover instant-remainder bargain from British anthologist Peter Haining, *Pulp Fictions: Hardboiled Stories* (Barnes & Noble, \$7.98).

Even if the pulps were mostly junk, there are still worthy stories to be rescued from their disintegrating pages. Sixteen tales by Howard Browne, most from '40s issues of *Mammoth Detective*, are gathered in *Incredible Ink* (Dennis McMillan, 1581 N. Debra Sue Place, Tucson, AZ 85715; \$80), which begins with a fascinating oral history distilled from interviews with Browne, who turned 90 this year. The account of his life as novelist, pulp writer-editor, and

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THE JURY BOX: Jon L. Breen

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screenwriter includes the story of how he came to write the 1952 novelette "The Veiled Woman," signed by Mickey Spillane. A bibliography and list of screen credits are also included. (You read the price correctly. The book is only available in a boxed edition limited to 350 signed copies.)

I've read just enough fiction by the legendary pulp *Weird Tales'* most famous contributor, H.P. Lovecraft, to know he's not my cup of tea, but he was a strong influence on two writers I admire, Robert Bloch and August Derleth. Two new volumes, one hardcover and one paperback, present the most famous works of the supernatural horror icon: *Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* (Ecco Press, \$23), with a substantial introduction by Joyce Carol Oates; and *The Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* (Dell, \$12.95), with introduction and extensive notes by Lovecraft biographer S.T. Joshi, whose four selections are all included among Oates's ten. But given Joshi's illustrations and extra editorial matter, collectors may want both.

Pulp writing was either an occupation or an influence on the dark suspense writers represented in two handsome volumes from The Library of America, an ambitious project that until now has included only Raymond Chandler among

crime fiction writers. *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1930s and '40s* (\$35) includes James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935), Edward Anderson's *Thieves Like Us* (1937), Kenneth Fearing's *The Big Clock* (1946), William Lindsay Gresham's *Nightmare Alley* (1946), and Cornell Woolrich's *I Married a Dead Man* (1948). All the entries in *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s* (\$35) save Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) originally appeared as paperback originals: Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), Charles Willeford's *Pick-up* (1967), David Goodis's *Down There* (1956), and Chester Himes's *The Real Cool Killers* (1959). Editor Robert Polito provides outstanding biographical and textual notes.

Richard Matheson's esteem by his fellow pros surpasses his reputation, considerable as it is, with the reading public. *Noir: Three Novels of Suspense* (G&G Books, 3601 Skylark Lane, Cedar Rapids, IA 52403; \$65), with an introduction by Matthew R. Bradley and an afterword by Ed Gorman, is a 500-copy signed limited edition comprising three of his paperback originals: *Someone is Bleeding* (1953), *Fury on Sunday*

(1953), and *Ride the Nightmare* (1959). The last is the best, but all three are gems of pure suspense — comparisons with Woolrich and Hitchcock aside, the versatile Matheson is unique.

**** Carolyn Wheat: *Troubled Waters*, Berkley, \$21.95. Brooklyn lawyer Cass Jameson looks back on her student radical years in one of the best and most even-handed mysteries to deal with the '60s' peace and liberation movements, weighing their positive and negative effects from a presumably wiser middle-aged perspective. It's also a terrific whodunit. Wheat's *Mean Streak* was a deserving Edgar nominee for best novel of 1996. This one is even better.

*** Max Allan Collins: *Mommy*, Leisure, \$4.99. The book version of a successful independent film, written and directed by Collins, is a direct sequel to William March's classic 1954 novel of psychological suspense, *The Bad Seed*. In the film, the grown-up Patty McCormack this time plays a murderous mother — her first name isn't given, but we all know it's Rhoda — whose child is suspicious of her. You can enjoy this well-calculated novel without knowing *The Bad Seed*, but only by reading the two novels in tandem can you appreciate how cleverly Collins has reversed March's situation. (Handily, *The Bad Seed* is avail-

able in a new edition [Ecco, \$9.95] with a fascinating biographical introduction by Elaine Showalter. The subject matter of a murderous child and repressed memory makes it surprisingly timely.)

** Ellen Hart: *Murder in the Air*, Ballantine, \$5.99. An old private-eye radio show is revived, its scripts resembling a notorious St. Paul murder case of the '50s. Hart's promising premise and nice finishing surprise are not helped by excessive length. (Amateur sleuth Sophie Greenway's talk-show host husband could use a good call screener.)

** Janwillem van de Wetering: *The Perfidious Parrot*, Soho, \$22. Though now independently wealthy, the Amsterdam trio of Grijpstra, De Gier, and the Commissaris are manipulated into going to the Caribbean to discover the fate of a hijacked oil tanker. The local color is fine as ever, but the passages of philosophical water-treading are too plentiful. If you're a fan of the series, read it, but anyone using this as an introduction to the series probably won't be back.

Erratum: In my Sept./Oct. column, I reviewed a novel by Jonathan Kellerman called *The Clinic* (Bantam '97). Unfortunately, I attached to the review the title of the author's previous novel, *The Web* (Bantam '96). My apologies to Dr. Kellerman.



MARITAL MANEUVERS

by Stephen Wasylyk

W

hen Gilbert Stinson Sterling III decided to get rid of his wife Gloria, he devoted no more than ten seconds to thoughts of divorce.

As the last surviving member of a long line of methodical people for whom monetary profit or loss was always the basis for a major decision, he was aware that divorce would deprive him of all her money, a horrifying specter that numbed his mind and made his brandy glass tremble, since her money was one reason he'd married her.

Indeed, the further thought that a divorce might well cost some of his own brought a moan of pain.

He had no choice. This was one marriage that had to end with "till death do us part."

The thought wasn't entirely pleasing. It had not, after all, been a bad marriage; off to a roaring start, with Gloria gracing his

arm at social functions with the beauty and poise only to be expected of a Sterling. A truly handsome couple, everyone said, and so suited to each other. The sex hadn't been bad, either. While the grand passion had dimmed, a lingering affection remained, which to his embarrassment, occasionally surfaced.

But floating to the top of the motive mix was the increasing difficulty of keeping one step ahead in the subtle daily strife inherent in matrimony; borne good-humoredly by half the population, but intolerable to those who pursued an idyllic marriage. Seldom finding one, of course, their quest enriching the portfolios of divorce attorneys, worthy people who recognized early in law school the lucrative opportunity presented by unfulfilled dreams.

Their daily spousal skirmishing had fostered a paranoia in Gilbert that everything that happened to him was the result of one of Gloria's insidious and vindictive plots. That these plots would stretch credulity to its outermost limits bothered him not at all. Gloria was capable of anything.

He was exceedingly weary of his matrimonial equivalent of the Hundred Years War, particularly since he felt he was losing more battles than he was winning.

There could be no cease-fire, armistice, or détente.

Gloria had to be nuked.

The unimaginative police, however, were notorious for placing the surviving spouse first on the suspect list. The problem would have to be approached with all the ingenuity and planning skill he'd inherited from his forebears, among whom were two generals who had never lost a battle, along with a few tycoons so adept at skimming the assets of a corporation none had ever been indicted by a grand jury.

A sad note must accompany this story; its author, Stephen Wasylyk, a contributor to *EQMM* for more than 20 years, died in the fall of 1996 at the age of 73. We have one more of his witty, down-to-earth stories in inventory, to be published later this year. It is our hope that a book publisher will someday bring out a collection of Wasylyk stories, for his talent was unique. †

He swirled his brandy smugly. He'd settle once and for all exactly who was in charge here.

While swirling his brandy and plotting her demise, Gilbert had no idea that Gloria was engaged in the same process. For all the same reasons. After all, their personalities had been determined by virtually the same backgrounds—the only difference being that Gloria was descended from two admirals who had never lost a naval engagement, along with a slew of politicians so adept at manipulating the system not one had ever been censured by an ethics committee.

Gloria's long and shapely fingers grasped the stem of her wine glass gently as she held her Chardonnay up to the light. As if into a crystal ball, she looked deep into the golden glow, seeking the safest method to end his insidious and vindictive plotting against her and still retain both his money and hers. She'd settle once and for all exactly who was in charge here.

Gilbert immediately discarded the idea of employing someone. Impossible to see himself negotiating under a dirty bridge in the middle of the night with a bearded, shifty-eyed lout wearing a T-shirt emblazoned HIRED KILLERS DO IT MANY WAYS. Further, those people didn't accept credit cards or send bills. They demanded cash. No way to come up with an acceptable sum under the terms of his father's trust fund, which gave him unlimited credit but only five hundred a week in pocket money, something difficult to explain to greedy people forever expecting large tips.

His narrow-minded trust administrator wouldn't look too kindly on a request for ten thousand or so to pay someone to kill Gloria. Not that he'd ask. The thought of parting with large sums made his blood run cold. And run even colder at the prospect of creating a unique 401K plan providing early retirement to the hiree, one hundred percent of the contributions coming from him through perpetual blackmail.

This would have to be a do-it-yourself project for which step-by-step instructions were not available, even from Time-Life Books.

He immediately discarded all of the usual close-contact methods like shooting, knifing, or strangulation. Invariably messy, and all would require an iron-clad alibi, almost impossible to arrange. They also projected somewhat of a macho image that would lead the police straight to the husband. What he needed was something

androgynous, as it were—slow poisoning or an accident, perhaps.

Dispatching Gloria safely would require research and analysis, even pie and bar charts generated on his PC to depict graphically the percentages of success of other spouses.

It didn't occur to him that only the techniques of the unsuccessful appeared in print. Those who had managed to regain the single state while avoiding the defendant's table wisely kept their mouths shut as to how they'd arranged the coup.

Gloria also had discarded the idea of using a third party. Not only was her ready-cash situation identical to Gilbert's, but well-bred ladies never negotiated on deserted piers in the middle of the night with bearded, shifty-eyed louts wearing T-shirts emblazoned HIRED KILLERS LEAVE YOU BREATHLESS. Good heavens, a man like that might well demand more than money from a classy, good-looking broad.

She would have to do it herself. She was creative enough. Her interior decorating was the envy of her friends.

Reviewing her options, it was clear a gun or a knife was out. Unquestioningly effective, but indicating a definite lack of breeding. And if she'd had the strength to strangle Gilbert—he had an eighty-pound weight advantage—she'd have done so long ago.

No, she needed something that would require no alibi, that would leave her widowhood the focal point of sympathy.

Her problem required research and analysis. She regretted she couldn't operate Gilbert's PC. Perhaps one of those lovely, colorful pie charts could narrow her choices down quickly.

Not one to dilly-dally, she spent the next morning in the public library, leafing through fact-crime books and studying microfilms of newspapers hoping to pick up a tip or two and finding none. There was nothing to be learned from the caliber of cases like the husband who had pushed his wife down an escalator in a mall in full view of fifty witnesses, then claimed she had tripped on her miniskirt. Her research did, however, reinforce her opinion that an accident was the way to go. Only the type of accident was open to question.

Bleary-eyed, on her way out, she wandered by a stack holding volumes analyzing the country's wars. A few had generated more books than casualties, which bespoke of the diligence of military scholars. One, in which an admiral among her antecedents had been given an entire chapter, caught her eye.

Amused, she flipped the book open. There the old boy was: walrus moustache, hair parted in the center, high-collared, brass-buttoned white uniform, stern look and all.

Immediately below the chapter heading was an italic quote of the admiral's military philosophy: *No enemy is without a weakness. Find that weakness and exploit it.*

Her spine prickled. She imagined a shaky, bony, ghostly finger raised in admonition, albeit with a kindly smile.

The form Gilbert's accident would take was suddenly clear.

The police were always suspicious of a convenient spousal disaster but not if it was one that had been long in the making. Predicted, in fact, by many people saying, "Anyone who swims as badly as you do, Gilbert, should be sewn into a life vest, even in his bath." Gilbert laughed. He could swim well enough to avoid disaster.

She, on the other hand, could well have been born with webbed hands and the tail of a fish, and spent her life on a rock enticing sailors to their doom.

His weakness. All she had to do was exploit it.

Her hand shook as she replaced the book, leaving it projecting from the row. She fled homeward, convinced that fortune had smiled on her. Along with the admiral.

Gilbert pursued his aims in life far more leisurely, so he didn't get to the library until afternoon. His eyes watering after a search through fact-crime books and newspaper microfilms of famous trials, he could only marvel at the lack of finesse on the part of some people; like the woman who insisted her husband had committed suicide by striking himself fifty times on the head with a baseball bat.

Leaving, he strolled by a stack containing volumes analyzing the country's wars. Projecting from a pristine row as if hastily replaced, a thick volume caught his eye. He recognized it as one in which a general among his antecedents had been given an entire chapter.

Amused, he flipped the book open. There the old boy was: walrus moustache, hair parted in the center, high-collared, brass-buttoned blue uniform, stern look and all, and with his quote below the chapter heading.

He seemed to hear a thin, quavering, old man's voice speaking from the grave.

Always hurl your strength against your opponent's most vulnerable point.

Voices in his head suddenly muttered, "If you keep driving like that, Gloria—" "Keep it up and you'll kill yourself one day, dear," "A hundred miles an hour? Oh, my."

Gloria always laughed. A superb tennis player and excellent swimmer, she'd extended her gifted athleticism to include defying speed limits, road conditions, the weather, and overloaded semis.

No one would question an accident so long in the making.

Gloria's most vulnerable point.

He could swear the general nodded in approval.

Smiling as he drove homeward, he pondered the question of where. City streets were out. Not even Lead-Foot Gloria could generate enough speed in traffic to acquire more than a few dents in the car and herself.

The accident had to occur on the open road, where she was wont to tool along at her usual reckless pace, oblivious to the laws of man and a body in motion; but in any crash, a seat belt, automatic braking system, and an airbag could negate his best effort. The thought irritated him so much, for a moment he considered demanding his trust administrators divest the fund of all shares in those inconsiderate automobile manufacturers.

He needed an accident for which no safety feature had yet been devised.

And then his smile broadened.

There was one road where the accident rate was variable but the survival rate always zero, since no car as yet came equipped with an ejection seat and parachute.

The cliffside road to the cove—where their seaside cottage and sailing boat, really Gloria's, were tucked away.

Now if she were to plunge from that road, carved into the face of a sheer cliff a hundred feet or more above a rock-studded shoreline, where the roiling waters were so deep, rough, and treacherous, no attempt was ever made to recover a vehicle—

Gilbert congratulated himself. Absolutely brilliant.

A flair for mathematics and the practical had shifted him from the traditional liberal arts to engineering, where he surprised everyone with a definite talent. Lurking beneath his engineering skills was a mind a creative terrorist would envy, so it required only the sudden blazing of the outdoor lights when he drove up to his home to give him the method he was seeking.

A motion sensor.

Hah. Instead of completing a lighting circuit, suppose a motion sensor at the side of the road told a chip to emit a signal to another chip—to trigger a small battery to set off a small quantity of plastic explosive molded to the steering mechanism of her car? Beautiful. While the motion device would respond to the passage of any vehicle, innocent lives wouldn't be at risk. Only when it found its electronic soul mate would a union be consummated that would truly cause the earth to tremble and the moon to stand still.

One of his engineering-school acquaintances had found more pleasure in reducing huge buildings to rubble than in constructing them. He would never miss a bit of plastic explosive the size of a wad of bubble gum. The other components were available at electronics stores. If he was lucky, he might even pick up a few on sale. A penny saved was a penny earned.

He was home free.

He looked up to find Gloria standing at the window. He'd be very humble when suggesting a romantic weekend of sailing, candlelit dinners, and champagne.

Awaiting his arrival for dinner, Gloria had concluded the best locale for drowning an inept swimmer was the sea.

From the two admirals and a host of other forebears who had wrested lucrative livings from the briny deep, she had inherited a love and talent for sailing—so deep she'd often thought the ideal way to go was to sink beneath the waves with all flags flying.

Now, if she and Gilbert were sailing and the boat capsized and threw them overboard, not an uncommon occurrence among the sailing fraternity, she could—under the guise of assisting a floundering swimmer who never wore a life jacket—usher him into a watery grave, and no authority would blink an eye.

The cove where their cottage and her sailing boat were tucked away beckoned with sly fingers.

She smiled. She'd be very humble when suggesting a romantic weekend of sailing, candlelit dinners, and champagne.

Watching him step from the car, she wondered why he was grinning. He usually arrived home wearing the expression of a dental patient heading for root canal.

Her invitation beat his to the punch by only two minutes. He masked his surprise, pleased she'd fallen into his trap through no

effort on his part, not wondering why at all. He requested only that they drive down separately.

Gloria agreed without hesitation. When he drove, she fidgeted because he was so slow. When she drove, his white-knuckled way of clinging to the dash irritated her.

She had no idea that Gilbert needed time to scout out the best spot on the road. And that unless she was alone in the car, Gilbert had wasted \$30.95 at Radio Shack.

From a host of forebears who had wrested a lucrative living from the earth, Gilbert had inherited the opinion that the sea was nice to look at, particularly at sunset, but anyone who ventured out upon its bosom was short-changed a few brain cells, since you couldn't walk home if your conveyance was disabled.

His no-frills mentality also ranked sailing right up there with golf as one of life's most useless activities, based on the observation that sailboats seldom went from Point A to Point B in a straight line.

At the mercy of the wind, you were always tacking or beating or jibing, easing or trimming or luffing sails, loosening or tightening ropes—which he refused to call halyards, lines, sheets, or anything else. As someone once said, a rope is a rope is a rope. Not to mention that a rope by any other name was still a rope that left him with abraded palms. Which, together with the salt-water spray and sun and wind scouring his face, created discomfort exceeded only by the conviction that entirely new strains of mildew and barnacles were breeding in his armpits and between his always-wet toes.

Gilbert's engineer's mind insisted that if one could not go from Point A to Point B by land, the practical alternative was to jump into a power cruiser at Point A, point the bow at Point B, and ram the throttles forward.

Still, good husband he'd once been, he'd always cheerfully crewed Gloria's pink sloop with its pink sails in spite of the non-masculine image it created, and tried not to fall overboard. Always hated it, really, but since it would be the last time, he could afford to be generous.

The sloop was running before the wind through gently rolling seas in the center of the bay, their sheltered little cove far behind. A balmy, glorious day for sailing. Gloria gazed upon Gilbert with

fondness, recalling days when they had sailed in happier times: the wind whispering, the sunlight sparkling, the salt air clearing the sinuses—none of which Gilbert had ever appreciated. As a sailor, he was a klutz. His antecedents, no doubt. He'd probably be a whizz on a tractor or combine, charging across a wheat field.

His klutziness made him vulnerable. He completely lacked the ability to sense, through the soles of his feet and the wind on his face, what was about to happen and what he should do. In a few moments, she intended to ease into a turn—jibe, in sailing parlance—without warning him. Unattended, the mainsail would suddenly catch the wind on the other side and drive the boom across the boat violently, sweeping away whatever was in its path. Like an unwarned Gilbert. And capsize the boat.

She eased the tiller a trifle. Gilbert smiled at her and nodded at a catboat crossing their bow. Not important, thought Gloria, until she saw that it was crewed by a teenaged couple who either shared Gilbert's ignorance of basic seamanship or were so enamored of the other's almost-naked body that they were paying as little attention as he was. And allowing their sail to go unattended.

The catboat's sail sagged. The other side suddenly caught the wind, filled with a dull pop, and swept the boom across the small boat. It lurched, heeled, hesitated as if making up its mind, and went over. Gloria mentally applauded her good luck. Reinforcement for her plan. Two boats capsized within minutes? A freak gust of wind that had caught even an experienced sailor unprepared. No question at all that whatever happened to Gilbert thereafter was strictly an accident.

Yet her seafaring blood stayed her hand on the tiller. The code of the sea demanded they render assistance, if required. Chances were, none would be. The soaked teenagers would probably be laughing as they scrambled aboard the capsized boat. Learning the hard way can sometimes be an adventure.

But since she couldn't be certain, she shouted commands at Gilbert, came about with practiced skill, and coasted up to the catboat, now riding the swells like a wounded white bird.

The erstwhile occupants weren't laughing. Both wore life vests, but the white-faced young woman was clinging to the end of the boom, supporting the young man. His head lolled, blood staining the side of his face.

After a look she could only describe as gloating, and before she could stop him, Gilbert belly-flopped into the water and splashed.

toward the couple. Gloria snapped to her feet angrily. Just showing off. No life vest, of course, and with his second-rate swimming ability, how much help could he be? Damned fool should have waited. The water wasn't cold enough to pose a threat, and the capsized boat wouldn't sink like the Titanic and drag the couple down with it. In the gentle swells, she could have maneuvered close enough to toss them a line and take them aboard in only a few minutes.

Her practiced hands edged the sloop closer. With Gilbert strenuously thrashing away on one side and the girl on the other, they brought the unconscious boy to the sloop. The lithe girl leaped aboard and helped Gloria heave him into the cockpit. Gloria turned and extended a hand to Gilbert.

Vigorously treading water, he grinned up at her.

"Nice try."

She rolled her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Now I know why you wanted to go sailing. You paid them to capsize the boat. If I didn't jump in to rescue them, you'd call me a coward. If I did, you hoped I'd drown."

Regretting she hadn't thought of that herself, she said, "You've swallowed too much salt water. Give me your hand."

He threw his head back and laughed, the laugh cut short as his head jerked forward, eyes wide with astonishment, teeth bared in a grimace. Clutching his chest, he sank.

Gloria sighed. As if she'd be taken in by such an obvious husbandly ploy.

Ten seconds later, she realized what Fate had extended on a silver platter. She hastily leaped in after him, but even though born to the water, she couldn't find him.

Neither, it developed, could anyone else.

There was a great deal of good, solid saltwater talk about tides, currents and crosscurrents, and undertows, all of which meant only that the sea had many ways to conceal what it elected to devour.

There was also some dispassionate discussion of how much more advantageous it was to have a heart attack on dry land, where CPR, medics, and a hospital were often readily available, but this was generally led by those who preferred to ponder the mysteries of the sea while seated on a veranda clutching a non-watery drink.



Gilbert, of course, was considered a hero. A stupid one, in Gloria's estimation, but a hero, nonetheless. Now that he was gone, she felt his loss deeply. She'd spent so much of her time planning his demise, her days now stretched empty before her. Along with her sense of loss, she felt a touch of irritation at the thought that it wouldn't be beyond him to kill himself to deprive her of the pleasure.

He still hadn't been found when she left the following afternoon. Nothing she could do there, and a great many matters had to be taken care of in the city. Like happily arranging for the inevitable funeral or memorial service, whichever the case might be, and digging out his will.

The road had little traffic, as usual, until, about a mile from where it ran along the very edge of the cliff, she found cars lined up as though it were rush hour in the city.

She sighed. An accident up ahead closing one lane, no doubt, with the police alternating traffic through the one remaining. Her car inched forward.

Lacking the talent of political pundits, newspaper columnists, and others who can see into the future, Gilbert had never dreamed of a traffic slowdown when he'd carefully positioned his little electronic device.

Since his speed-loving wife was familiar with the road and would ignore the thirty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit as usual, he'd calculated that when she passed it, she'd be moving along at fifty miles an hour, which was 4400 feet per minute or 73.3333 per second. (Engineers always go out to at least four decimal places and never work with "approximately" or "about" when calculating, although an occasional inexplicable structure collapse might indicate that some do.)

He allowed three seconds for the shock to wear off after the device exploded, another three before she realized she could no longer steer, and another to apply the brake. She would then have traveled 513.3333 feet or 171.1111 yards. He placed his device, therefore, by the side of the road 100 yards before the sharp turn.

When Gloria finally tramped on the useless brake pedal, she should be 71.1111 yards beyond the guardrail and in midair, journeying back in time as she gracefully plunged past the layered deposits of successive geological ages exposed by the cliff face, on her airborne return to the ancient sea from whence the scientists say we all came.

As it was, her car was barely moving when the explosive went off. Carefully shaped by Gilbert to destroy only the steering—the car had to keep speeding along—the peripheral force only threw the hood back across the windshield and deposited the grille and radiator on the trunk of the car ahead.

Gilbert had also miscalculated her athlete's reaction time.

Out of the car in one second flat, shock or no shock, she contemplated, from a safe distance and with utter disbelief, the resultant fire.

A former Navy SEAL coming the other way, having caused similar havoc here and there throughout the civilized world during his career, recognized the signs, looked for and found Gilbert's little device by the side of the road, and realized what had happened. And what would have happened if she'd been flying along as usual.

He gently broke the news of how lucky she'd been.

The traffic tie-up had been caused by the morbidly curious slowing to gawk at boats attempting to recover a body tumbling about in the breaking surf at the foot of the cliff.

A body tumbling about in the breaking surf?

Had to be Gilbert. That creep.

First he had to die before she could kill him.

Then he'd made a deal with Poseidon or some other god of the sea to make his appearance at this time and place.

Why? Oh, she knew why.

So she'd spend the rest of her days wondering if she should hate him for trying to take her life, or forgive him for giving it back to her.

She screamed and ran to the edge of the cliff, pursued by the SEAL. He thought she intended to throw herself over, but arms raised, fists clenched, she stood there and shrieked a banshee barrage of imprecations and very unladylike words—some truly creative for a civilian—at the battered body being pulled from the white-foamed waters crashing among the rocks.

Certain phrases, like "keep your goddamn money," left him thoroughly puzzled. The expression on the face of the corpse, clear even at that distance, puzzled him even more.

He was familiar with the toothy rictus sometimes exhibited by the dead, but this one struck him as having the fat, smarmy, smug smile of someone thoroughly enjoying a secret, inner joke. ●

THE MUSIC LOVERS

by Seymour Shubin

Bette and I had just moved into our apartment that day and were in the process of putting things away when we heard footsteps coming up the stairs. We looked at each other, frowning, and walked out of the kitchen to the long staircase that led up to our apartment from the street. A bearded man was standing halfway up, smiling at us, drunkenly.

"Name's Al. Live next door. Your door was open—shouldn't keep your door open—and I thought I'd come in to welcome you an' see if I can be of any help."

"Thank you," Bette said weakly, "but we—"

He continued to walk up, holding onto the railing against the wall to steady himself. He was a rather good-looking guy, maybe fifty-three, with drink-heavy blue eyes and a wide smile within a Van Gogh-ish beard.

"Ver-ry nice," he said, standing at the top of the stairs and looking toward the kitchen and then the living room. Apparently he'd never been here before. "Well, welcome," he said, and stuck out his hand.

I shook it.

"Very nice," he said again.

No, I said when he asked, we didn't need any help. But thanks.

"Wife's name's Hetta," he said. He waved vaguely in front of his face. "You need anything, any time you need . . ." Then he turned heavily and made his way down the steps. I followed right behind

Seymour Shubin is an author whose works stay in a reader's mind. As if we needed proof of that, he's just informed *EQMM* that his first novel, *Anyone's My Name*, first published in 1953 and a *New York Times* bestseller, is about to be published again in the United States. It has already come out for a second time in France. ¶

him in case he fell. And this time I made sure to lock the door.

"God, he gave me a scare," Bette said as I walked up.

"What's the matter," I kidded her, "you don't like friendly?"

"Friendly. He scared the hell out of me." Then, "What a shame, what a pity. Basically, he seems so nice."

"That's right. And he did mean well."

She shook her head sadly. "It's, what now, almost two? And he could barely hold himself up."

Our apartment was on the second floor of a converted brownstone, above a real estate office, the only apartment in the building. Al and Hetta lived in the entire brownstone to our left. He was, we learned later, a draftsman who worked, when he did work, out of the house. And she was a former schoolteacher whom we were rarely to see out of the house—a "former" teacher, apparently, because she was as alcoholic as he was. And, like him, beneath the puffiness of face there were the strong traces of handsomeness.

They had no children, but they did have cats. Lots of cats.

We moved in there in the summer. It was a great apartment, especially for a young couple just starting out. There was something bohemian about it, but with the comfort of central air conditioning. Which brings me to the first problem we had with them.

Although our two buildings adjoined each other in the front, a narrow courtyard separated them at the rear. Their bedroom—which we knew was a bedroom because it was always a question if they'd be sober enough to close the curtains—faced ours across the yard. And from one of the windows jutted a rusting, slanty-angled air conditioner. That clanged and banged throughout our apartment.

I was a freelance magazine writer who worked out of the apartment, and was attempting a book. And there was no way I could shut out the noise. Then one day, seeing him walking toward me on the street, the urge to approach him about it became suddenly overwhelming.

"Al, how you doing?"

"Here and there," he said with a smile. He looked sober, but the stiffness of his body said it was taking effort to stand straight.

"Al, I don't know if there's anything you can do about this, but your bedroom air conditioner? I hate to be a bad neighbor, I'm really not a complainer, but are you aware it makes . . . you know, a lot of noise? I mean, a lot more than the ordinary noise. Do you

think there's anything you can do about it? I mean, maybe it needs oil?"

Oh, he was sorry about that. Hadn't realized.

"Glad you told me," he said. "Really glad."

He sounded so sincere that it took Bette to make me realize that he probably wouldn't give it another thought, or maybe even remember it. And nothing did change. But then about two weeks after that, Bette and I were in the living room when we heard a tremendous crash. When we rushed to a window, we saw that the air conditioner had fallen to the yard. And now Al and Hetta were out there, standing looking dazedly at the wreckage. Then he whirled on her.

"Why?" he yelled. "Shoulda told me!"

"Shoulda told you *what*?"

"You were gonna dust it, wipe it!"

"I didn't *touch* it."

"You did somethin', you had to do somethin'! It don't just fall!"

"I didn't do anything! And don' yell at me!"

"You don' yell at me!"

He pushed her and she pushed back and he swung, missing, and she ran screaming into the building.

"Tod, call the police," Bette pleaded.

I started to, then stopped as I saw her come into the bedroom. She sat down on the bed. He started to come in, then stopped, waved his hands, spun around, and left.

"It's terrible," Bette said.

But now that things had calmed down, I could only think what a miracle, that maybe now they'd get an air conditioner that didn't make all that noise. But they didn't replace it. Instead they opened the windows. And for the first time we became aware that they played music. All day. Good music—symphonies, concertos, sonatas. The best. The greatest. But all day. And loud. *Loud*.

On the third day I called them. "Al. This is Tod next door."

"Tod, how you doing?"

"Al, will you do me a favor? A big favor? Would you lower your record player a little?"

"We don't have a record player, we've got a radio."

"Would you lower it for me? I'm trying to work."

"Sure. Why didn't you tell me? Sure."

Almost instantly our apartment went silent. But two or three days later the music came on as loud as ever. And stayed on.

The only thing louder was their fights.

"They're like animals," Bette said. "And the thing is, they're intelligent people. And nice, if it weren't for the drinking. I still think of the day he came over to help us."

"Look," I said, "I'm going to call 'em again."

This time Hetta answered. Her first word came out "Low?"

I said, "Hetta, this is next door. Tod. I hate to bother you, but would you please lower the radio for me?"

"You don't like music?" There was a little giggle in her voice.

"I love music. But don't you think it's blasting?"

Al came on. "Who's this?"

"This is Tod again. I really hate to be a pain, but I'd appreciate it if you would lower it."

"Sure." Then without hanging up, he began yelling at her, blaming her, and then she began yelling at him. Then the phone went dead. I was sure he'd forget about the radio, but he didn't. For a few moments I couldn't believe the sudden silence. It was as though something pulsating and noxious had been drained out of the air.

But that same night Bette and I were wakened by the blasting of the radio.

"I don't believe this," I heard myself saying. "I don't believe this."

I looked over at the clock on the night table. It was almost three-thirty.

"Those bastards, those bastards!"

I grabbed the phone and punched out their number. It was almost five minutes before he came on. Sleepily. "Hullo."

"Al, this is next door. I'm sorry to wake you, but could you please—"

"Jee-zus," he cried out, "why don't you people go to sleep?"

What? I wanted to reach my hands through the phone for his throat. "What do you think we're trying to do?" I yelled. "What do you think's keeping us up? What do you—"

He hung up. And the music kept on. I ran into the living room, grabbed a small radio, found rock music, turned it up loud. I was going to put it against the wall or open the window—

I turned it off. And for the first time I thought of murder. Not seriously, mind you, but still it was the first time I can remember where I really wanted someone dead.

The music was still playing loud the next morning. I called the

police, then watched from my front window as a patrol car pulled up and an officer got out and went to their door. Soon the music stopped. But a couple of days later, it was the same thing. I called the police again.

I never told the police who I was, but of course Al and Hetta knew. In fact, he made a big thing out of smiling at me as we passed on the street one day.

"Look," Bette said when the second cop's visit didn't work for more than two days, "we're just going to have to move."

"Move. Those sons of bitches aren't going to make us move!"

We'd started playing our own TV and CD player loud, to drown out their music. But theirs always seemed a little higher. Then one afternoon, a Saturday, I called Bette to come to the window. We would do everything we could to avoid looking into their bedroom, but there they were, sprawled out on separate beds, fully dressed and asleep while the radio was blasting.

"They're not even listening," she said. "They're dead drunk, they're in a stupor—"

"And we have to listen, we have to hear it!"

I swept up the phone and stabbed out their number. And I kept calling them for maybe fifteen minutes without them waking up. Then I ran to their house and rang the doorbell. I kept my finger on it for minutes at a time. I could hear it ringing through the house. Then I knocked hard on the door, then again—and the second time I did, it gave. It creaked open.

There was a door to the left that opened to the first floor. But in front of me was the stairway to the second floor. It seemed to climb up into darkness, though the day was bright with sun. And even before I took a step toward the stairs, I was hit by the stench of cat urine.

I called up there, "Hello!"

Nothing. Just the music. Beethoven, I remember, though I don't remember what.

"Al!"

I pictured them in their beds.

Maybe, I thought, they're dead.

It was with a feeling of both hope and dread of what I might find that I took the first step up.

"Al!"

Still only silence. I took another slow step up, then another. Something brushed against my ankle but I didn't have time to be

startled because I saw instantly that it was a cat. It ran up the steps and stared down at me. Three or four others joined it. One of them meowed and came down toward me.

I continued walking up through the stench.

I was on the second floor now, in a hallway strewn with clothes and newspapers, staring through the din of music into their bedroom. They lay in the same fixed way, he on his back, mouth open, she on her right side. I came closer, heart beating fast, unable to tell if they were alive. And then I saw the rise and fall of their breathing.

The radio was on a night table between their beds. I went over and looked at it carefully, to be sure I knew how to turn it off, aware that a greater blasting—or even the jolt of total silence—might wake them. But they didn't move in the room's sudden hush. I walked quietly out of the room and down the steps, closing the door.

Bette was waiting for me at the top of our stairs. I said, "Honey, you'll never believe what I did."

"Believe? I saw you. Oh God, he had the legal right to kill you. You shouldn't have done that. That was crazy."

"Well, they drove me crazy."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Oh stop it. It's funny. It's something we'll be telling our kids."

"You took a terrible chance."

It was maybe an hour later when we heard them fighting.

"You did!"

"No, you did!"

"Don't tell me that! I know what I did! You did!"

"I didn't touch that goddamn radio!" she screamed.

"You're saying I did? Are you telling me I did? Don't tell me I did, you low-life bitch! I know what I did! Don't tell me!"

Bette said, "Oh Jesus. Let's get out of here. I want some fresh air."

"This is funny," I said. "I'm sorry, but it is funny."

"Let's get out of here. Let's take a walk, something."

We walked over to a small park several blocks away. Then we stopped at a luncheonette and had lunch. When we headed back and turned the corner at our street, we were jolted by the sight of several police cars parked up the block along our curb, and a crowd of people staring on from across the street.

"What . . ." But Bette, a hand starting to rise to her mouth, couldn't finish, and we both began walking faster.

Something made us hesitate going over to the police. Instead we went across the street and asked what happened. Two people answered at the same time. They were dead, the couple who lived there. Apparently he'd stabbed her—repeatedly—and then hanged himself.

Bette and I stared at each other. Her face was drained of blood. She looked sick. And I felt not only horrified and guilty but afraid. Of the stories that might come out about what I'd done. Even about my fingerprints on the radio.

But most of all, I knew that this was a time that could change our lives together. Where we would somehow either become closer—or grow irretrievably apart.

An officer spotted us as we started to walk into our building. He came over and asked if we'd known the people next door. I said yes.

"What kind of people were they?"

I said, "They seemed nice. Except they were very heavy drinkers."

"Yeah," he said with a nod, "there were bottles all over the place."

I was almost afraid to say what I said next. "They played their radio a lot. Loud. It's the only problem I had with them."

"Yes," Bette spoke up for the first time, "they loved music." And as I looked at her she said, "Good music. It's so sad, so horrible. I know we'll always think of them when we hear good music." ●

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

by Linda Bosson

A lisping assassin named Beth
Said, "What I dithlike about death
Is that when the blood thplashes,
Its red color clashes
With the pretty pink flowers on my dreth."

THE THEFT OF THE RUSTY BOOKMARK

by Edward D. Hoch

Driving through the slushy streets of Greenwich Village on a brisk December afternoon, Nick Velvet saw a clerk standing in front of a flower shop smoking a cigarette. In the old days, when he was growing up in the Village, that man would have been a lookout, ready to sound the alarm if any cops appeared to break up the high-stakes gambling in the back room. But times had changed, and now it was just a guy who wasn't allowed to smoke on the job.

Nick had driven down from Westchester, something he hated to do during the Christmas shopping season. An old school chum, Charles O'Neill, had phoned him that morning on an urgent matter, promising to pay double Nick's usual twenty-five-thousand fee for a rush job. That was enough to get him into the car, despite Gloria's complaint that he'd promised to go shopping with her. And that was enough to have him squeezing into a parking space on Hudson Street near the White Horse Tavern.

O'Neill was a few years younger than Nick but they'd played baseball together in high school and been casual friends ever since. His classy Greek Revival house was a few blocks back, past the flower shop, and Nick nodded to the smoker as he went by. This

The most popular of Edward D. Hoch's series characters, the irrepressible Nick Velvet has once again captured the imagination of important producers and writers for television. Mr. Hoch tells us that the character is now under option to writer/producer Frank Lupo, the creator of such TV hits as *The A-Team* and *Hunter*. We hope to see Nick on television soon! †

was not his first visit to the O'Neill place. Charles owned a sports catering service that had brought him into contact with certain mob elements in the past. He was a good family man with a pretty wife and a couple of cute kids. But his troubles with the mob wouldn't go away. His brother-in-law Bob Temple had been killed at home a year earlier, and no one really believed the knife had been wielded by a crack addict breaking into houses at random. Charles feared the mob had sent a warning that he should sell the business and go into some other line of work.

"Good to see you again, Nick," Charles O'Neill greeted him at the front door. "Merry Christmas."

"You're five days early, but I'll take a drink anyway if you're offering one. What's up? More trouble with the mob?"

O'Neill led him into the big living room with its polished hardwood floor and oversized mirrors reflecting the myriad ferns and flowering plants with which his wife Ida had decorated the place. "I have no mob contacts, Nick. You should know that." He picked up a decanter from the sideboard. "Too early in the day for bourbon?"

"A bit. A cold beer would be fine if you have one."

Charles O'Neill chuckled. "The first time we ever met you were drinking a beer." He opened a small refrigerator below the sideboard and took out a bottle. "I think you were eighteen at the time."

Nick declined a glass and took a sip. Even on a chilly day it tasted good. "How are Ida and the kids?"

"Fine. They're out seeing Santa Claus with my sister."

Nick took another sip of beer. "Now what's your problem?"

"Are you familiar with The Mysterious Bookshop on West Fifty-sixth Street?"

"I've passed it. Down the street from Carnegie Hall's stage door."

"That's the place. A man named Otto Penzler owns it, and in addition to selling new books he buys and sells used mysteries, especially valuable first editions. Buys them from all over the world."

Nick glanced at the single bookcase with its collection of book-club titles. "Are you a collector?"

"I'm barely a reader. Those are Ida's books. My brother-in-law Bob was the mystery fan. Did you know him?"

"Bob Temple? Never met him, but I saw your sister once."

"His death was a terrible blow to Marci. And then there were all the rumors of a mob killing. No truth to it, of course. He was probably stabbed by some drug addict looking for money." O'Neill laughed sadly. "The house was full of books, not money."

"Where does The Mysterious Bookshop figure in all this?"

"My sister Marci has been wanting to clear out Bob's things ever since he was killed. She thinks it's morbid to keep them, and I agree. But she just can't bring herself to go through everything. Just after Thanksgiving she and Ida spent a week at a beauty spa on Long Island. While they were gone I packed up all Bob's mysteries and sold them to Otto Penzler. He paid a pretty good price for them, and best of all, it got them out of the house—about four hundred books in ten boxes."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I sold something I shouldn't have. Now I need to get it back. I need you to steal it for me."

"Valuable books are like cash or jewels. You know I don't touch anything of value."

"This isn't a book. It's a bookmark in one of the mysteries I sold."

"Go in and tell Penzler about it."

"I can't do that. He'd probably want a fortune for it."

"Nowhere near the fortune you're offering me to steal it."

O'Neill looked pained. "I know you'll keep your mouth shut."

"All right," Nick said with a sigh. "What does it look like and what book is it in?"

"It's a thin strip of copper with some rust on it—a combination bookmark and letter opener, really. But I don't know just where it is."

"How many books are there?"

"He bought them all—over four hundred, all hardcover. I took them to the store in my van and helped carry them up to his private study. It's a big room on the second floor with his personal library in it. He said he'd have to store the books there until he could price them after Christmas. This is their busy season at the store. So that gives us a few days, at least."

"I'll need time to flip through four hundred books. That means breaking in at night."

Charles O'Neill shook his head. "The store has a good alarm system, and Penzler lives right upstairs. You wouldn't have time to find it before you were discovered."

"Then I'll go in while the store is open."

"I can tell you Penzler and his assistant are in and out of that study all the time. There are several other employees too, and they make sure no one goes in there."

"I'll find a way."

"It has to be before Christmas, and that's Monday. The store will probably be closed on Sunday too. So you've only got till Saturday."

He was interrupted by the opening of the front door and the voices of women and children. Ida O'Neill, a dark-haired, pale-skinned beauty, entered with her two young daughters and Charles's sister Marci. Nick put down his empty bottle and said hello to them all.

"We saw Santa, Daddy!" the youngest girl hurried to tell her father. The older one, at an age to know better, simply smirked.

Ida O'Neill turned to Nick. "It's good to see you again. You know Charles's sister, don't you?"

"I believe we met once years ago," Nick said. Marci Temple was one of those almost-pretty women who relied on cosmetics to complete the job nature had left undone. She was a bit younger than her brother and Ida, and seeing her now, Nick couldn't help but remember how her husband had died. He and Marci had been awakened around three A.M. by an intruder. Bob had gone to investigate and Marci had heard a tussle and a scream from her husband. She found him dying from a throat wound and immediately phoned the police. He was dead when they arrived a few minutes later. The knife-wielding slasher had escaped.

"I remember you," Marci Temple said, shaking Nick's hand. "It was when we were both a lot younger."

"What brings you into town today?" Ida asked, shucking the winter coats from her daughters. "Christmas shopping?"

"I suppose you could call it that," Nick said. He glanced at his watch and told Charles O'Neill, "I really must be getting back. Gloria will wonder what's happened to me."

"I'll be hearing from you?"

"Before the end of the week," Nick promised. When Charles walked him to the door, he noticed the man was still smoking in front of the flower shop. "That guy must really be hooked on cigarettes."

O'Neill chuckled. "No, they run a crap game in the back of the

flower shop and he's the lookout for the cops. It's just like the old days."

"Yeah," Nick said and walked to his car.

The first thing he did, that same afternoon, was to drive uptown to Fifty-sixth Street and leave his car in a parking garage while he paid a visit to The Mysterious Bookshop, a narrow brownstone building about halfway down the block between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Its front window was decorated for the holidays, with tinsel and Christmas ornaments mixed among the books. A sign in one corner announced that mystery writer Lawrence Sanders would be signing copies of his newest Matt Scudder novel the following afternoon from four to six.

He walked down a few steps to the door. It was locked, and he had to press a buzzer to be admitted. The store itself was small and crowded, with shelves stocked with paperbacks and a central table featuring new hardcover books. It took him a moment to realize there was another floor upstairs. He made his way up a spiral staircase to the hardcover department, where bookshelves stretched from floor to ceiling and a ladder was necessary to reach the top. Comfortable chairs seemed to invite reading, but here too there were more buyers than browsers as Christmas approached. He glanced at the books, at an extensive Sherlock Holmes section, and even at a pile of back issues of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, where somewhat fictionalized accounts of his exploits appeared regularly.

A man he quickly identified as Otto Penzler was speaking on the telephone with someone, apparently a collector, making notes as he talked. When he finished, he went quickly through a small connecting room into a large rear study. Nick caught a glimpse of bookshelves, with boxes piled on the floor, before an employee informed him that the area was private. He glanced around some more, noting a large metal fire door that led out to the building's staircase. There were apartments and offices on the upper floors, but he could see no way that these would help him. He had to be in that back room long enough to go through four hundred books, and that was a problem. The alarm system seemed to be a good one, making a night visit difficult and dangerous. Doing it by day meant keeping Penzler and the other employees out of that room for a half-hour or longer.

Nick shifted ideas around in his head, weighing each in turn.

He could have Gloria phone the store at a prearranged time, pretending to be a collector with a large library to sell. Nick could slip into the study while Penzler was occupied on the phone. But he realized a flaw in the idea almost at once. Surely there was another phone in the study, and it was only chance that Penzler had taken today's call out in the store itself. The odds were greater that he'd speak to a collector from his study.

Still, he had the beginning of another idea. The big problem was time, but there might be a way to work around that. The rusty bookmark wasn't made of paper or cloth or plastic, after all. It was made of metal.

By the following morning he'd worked it out. He would do it that day because the appearance by Lawrence Block would bring more traffic to the bookshop, and more traffic would mean more confusion with the Christmas crowds. A call to the public library brought him the names of a half-dozen well-known book collectors who specialized in mysteries. He looted Gloria's shelves of a handful of old mysteries she'd planned to donate to the Salvation Army, and then went out to purchase a particular piece of equipment that he'd need.

Gloria came upon him as he was fitting everything into a large box. "You just bought that thing this morning and you're taking it away already?"

"I need it for a job," he answered vaguely. He stuffed paper into the box along with his gadget, then arranged the books on top of it. After sealing the box with tape, he typed a label to Otto Penzler, using the name of one of the book collectors for the return address. Beneath the collector's address he typed and underlined: *Letter follows!*

From his closet he chose a brown shirt and a pair of brown slacks, with a brown jacket to wear over it. Gloria was doing some computer work when she saw him and groaned. "It's the UPS man again!"

"It works, doesn't it? Everyone trusts a UPS man."

"What if they ask about your truck?"

"It's parked down the block. Couldn't get any closer."

"I hope he's paying you enough for working Christmas week."

"Double."

She nodded and went back to her computer. "Good luck."



At exactly ten minutes to five that afternoon Nick Velvet crossed the street in front of The Mysterious Bookshop carrying a large brown box. At the bookshop door he rested it on the steps and rang the bell for admittance. He could see the place was jammed with customers and autograph seekers. When the door buzzed he poked his head in and said, "Delivery for Otto Penzler."

"Leave it here," the bearded man behind the desk said.

"Can't. This one needs a signature."

"Otto is upstairs. We're having an author signing. You'll never get through this crowd."

"Is there another way up?"

"Go up the steps through the brownstone entrance and we'll open the fire door for you."

Nick did as he was told and after a moment the metal door swung open. Otto Penzler stood there, refilling a guest's wine glass. "Who's this from?" he asked, bending to read the label. "Carl Fox! I wonder what he's sending me. Haven't spoken to him in years."

"On the label it says *Letter follows*. Probably got delayed in the Christmas mail."

Penzler scrawled his signature on the form Nick offered him. "All right. Put it in the back room, will you? On the floor against the wall."

"Sure thing!"

"You're not our usual UPS man."

"Working a double shift for Christmas. It's our busy time."

Penzler glanced at the sea of faces surrounding the table where Lawrence Block was signing books. "You're telling me!"

Nick hurried through the doors into the book-lined study. There seemed to be boxes everywhere, but he quickly spotted the group of ten that O'Neill had described. He'd expected Penzler to open the box he'd delivered, at least for a look, but he'd been too busy for that. Now Nick opened it and reached beneath Gloria's books for the hand-held metal detector he'd hidden there. It was the type sometimes used at airports and high-security events to search for weapons. He adjusted it to its most sensitive setting and ran it quickly over the boxes of books. He figured he had less than a minute before Penzler or someone else came looking for him.

Nothing sounded the warning beep on the first pass over the boxes so he moved a couple of them and tried it again from a different angle. This time he was rewarded with a buzz and a blink-

ing light. He opened the box and quickly flipped through a couple of the books. A slender piece of copper, tapered to a point at one end, slid out of the second book. From its shape and size it looked more like a letter opener than a bookmark, but he could see the rust along the edges. He slipped it into a plastic bag in his pocket and turned off the metal detector, placing it under his jacket. Then he quickly resealed the box with a piece of tape and left the study, returning to the crowded bookshop.

Otto Penzler was busy trying to line up people waiting for autographed books. He never looked in Nick's direction as Nick slipped out the metal door to the brownstone's front entrance. In another moment he was down the steps to the sidewalk, mingling with the Christmas crowd.

Charles O'Neill sighed gently as Nick took the plastic bag from his pocket and laid it on the coffee table. "One rusty bookmark, as ordered."

"You're a wizard, Nick. Always have been." He produced an envelope full of currency and slid it across the table.

They were seated in O'Neill's living room later that same evening. Ida was upstairs with the children, getting them ready for bed, and the sounds of laughter drifted down to them. Children were always happy in the days before Christmas.

"There's just one thing—"

"What's that?"

"Those spots of rust along the edges of the bookmark. Copper doesn't rust. Only iron does. Copper is slow to corrode, and when it does the corrosion products are green, not rust-colored. This is something else, something like dried blood."

O'Neill was silent for a moment. "Take the money, Nick. You've earned it."

But Nick Velvet wasn't quite through talking. "Bob Temple was killed with that bookmark or letter opener, wasn't he? There was never a burglar. The killer had to dispose of the weapon quickly so it went into one of the hundreds of books in Temple's collection, just before the police arrived. Who killed him? Who slashed his throat with that thin strip of copper with its pointed end? It had to be Marci, of course. Your sister Marci. It couldn't have been anyone else."

"Don't get into this, Nick. We've been friends for too long."

"You wouldn't pay fifty grand for just anyone. If you'd killed

him yourself you'd know where the weapon was hidden and you wouldn't have sold the books to Penzler without removing it. Likewise, if your wife Ida had done it she would have removed the weapon on one of her visits to Marci's place over the past year. Only Marci could safely leave that bloodstained bookmark where it was. With Bob dead the books were hers, and they were in her house. She never dreamed you'd do her the favor of packing them up and selling them while she was out of town."

Charles O'Neill shook his head, and there may have been tears in his eyes. "When she got back and found the books gone, she was wild with fear. She had to tell me. They'd both been drinking and he hit her. It wasn't the first time. She grabbed that bookmark—it's actually sold as a combination bookmark and letter opener—and struck out at him. She didn't mean to kill him."

"The police have to be told, Charles," Nick said quietly. "It's for a jury to decide what she meant to do."

The sounds from upstairs had finally ceased, and Ida came down alone. "They're in bed," she said. "Let's get the Christmas tree up."

"I'll speak to Marci after Christmas," O'Neill told Nick quietly. "Then I'll tell her what she has to do."

Nick nodded and slid the envelope back across the coffee table. "Use this to hire a good lawyer."

"Nick—"

He turned to Ida. "Could you use some help in putting up that Christmas tree?"

It was after Christmas before Otto Penzler had an opportunity to look into the big box that had arrived from Carl Fox. No letter had followed as promised, and he was puzzled by the wads of paper with a dozen or so books on top. Finally he phoned Carl on the West Coast, but the collector knew nothing of the package.

"It wasn't from me, Otto. You know I don't work that way."

"I'm baffled by the whole thing. Why should anyone send it to me and put your name on it?"

"Is there anything of value inside?"

Otto was staring down at the box as he spoke. "That's the funny thing about it, Carl. Most of the books are of little value, but in among them is a mint first edition of Sue Grafton's *A Is for Alibi*. It could bring a thousand dollars. Why would anyone just give it away like that?" ●



STRANGERS ON A SLEIGH

by James Powell

“H

omey,” approved Drucker from the other leather chair, making a scoop with his head which took in the living room and the house itself. “Nice.”

“Thank you,” said George Seton cautiously. He tugged at the ends of the flamboyant bow tie hidden behind his full gray beard and looked out at his brother-in-law from beneath sceptical eyebrows.

Drucker’s words were a considerable turnaround from his last visit three years before when, watching another Saturday afternoon football game in that same chair, the man had pronounced Seton’s house a dump. At the time Seton had insisted the place, though modest, was quite suited to their needs. But he admitted the neighborhood had seen better days. This mild concession hadn’t been enough to shut Drucker up. Years of working in the gutter press had filled the man with pry and nastiness. “The neighborhood’s a slum,” Drucker had insisted, adding that he’d been nosing

around and, with a job like Seton had, he should be earning real big bucks.

In fact, his brother-in-law was right. Considering the cover the Concern had given him—Seton was supposed to be a stock analyst for Yonder Star, a mutual fund that specialized in small toy companies with growth potential farther down the road—he should be earning considerably more than he was. “Our bonus system’s out of skew,” tried Seton, hoping a partial truth might satisfy.

“Skew?” Seton could still remember the contempt in Drucker’s voice when he repeated the word and batted it out of the air with his hand. “Know what I think?” the man continued. “I think you’re cheating on my little sister. I think you’ve got some bimbo set up in an apartment somewhere. That’s why Estelle has to live in a dump in a slum.”

Seton had protested, but not very much. The Concern put great stock in anonymity. Better his brother-in-law believe he had a woman shackled up somewhere than know the truth.

All that had been three years ago. And now Drucker was back and as nice as pie, with no talk of bimbos or dumps. Seton wondered why.

“Let me freshen your drink,” he said when the game went to a commercial break. Seton took their glasses back into the kitchen and made two more drinks. His wife was fixing dinner. She looked at him and smiled, happy her brother had started visiting them again. Seton smiled back. Estelle put up with a great deal. His career, his real career with the Concern, certainly hadn’t worked out the way he expected.

Back in the living room, Seton found his brother-in-law across the room admiring a landscape print above the drop-front desk. “Nice,” said Drucker.

It is only rarely that a year goes by without a Christmas story by James Powell. The holiday seems to set his imagination alight and provide a showcase for his talents as a satirist and creator of fantastic plots. In 1995 one of Mr. Powell’s Christmas stories, “Breakout from Mistletoe Five” (*EQMM* Mid-December), won a nomination for the Arthur Ellis Award. May he fare as well this year! †

"Estelle tells me you've come up in the world," ventured Seton when they'd taken their seats again.

Drucker looked pleased with himself. "No more cheap tabloids for Mrs. Drucker's boy Harold," he said. "My new outfit's top of the line. I called your office a couple of times to fill you in."

"I'm away from the desk a good bit."

"So they told me," said Drucker, adding with a smile, "Anyway, why don't we set up something for lunch? I'll come by and pick you up. I'd like to see the place."

"Yonder Star? Not much to see. Just somewhere to hang my hat," insisted Seton and, turning his head, he pretended to give all his attention to the television screen, where the action had started up again.

Seton left the house early the next morning, driving out to Holly Boughs Hall, the Concern's compound in the country. The autumn day was cloudy and warm. The rough-hewn face in the guard-house window raised the barrier and smiled him through. He followed the cobbled road up past the brick stables and the exercise field and parked in his space beside the large house whose corner towers had conical roofs somewhat in the Norman style. A trio of gardeners raking leaves greeted him as he got out of the car. Seton waved back and headed for the front steps. On the gravel walkway it occurred to him that Quintillian might be scowling down at him from the second floor line of French doors where the council chamber was. He did not look up. He'd see Quintillian soon enough.

The security officer on the door politely reminded him he'd be late if he didn't hurry. Seton hurried, stopping only for a moment at the cashier's window to drop off his expense account for last week. When he reached his cubicle he changed into his uniform. It was full kit for a meeting like this. He checked himself in the mirror behind the door, adjusted his belt so the buckle was centered under the line of tunic buttons, and sprinted for the stairs in a squeak of boot leather.

"Come." The voice was Quintillian's. Seton took a deep breath, opened the heavy oak door, and stepped inside. The Council of Elves was seated around a long, low table of polished wood. Each member wore a smartly tailored forest-green uniform with epaulets and a peaked hat. No one acknowledged Seton's presence. They continued their discussion, which involved Santa-clone

training for the coming year. Minor Brothers department stores, Seton's old alma mater, was still sponsoring the program. Seton listened and watched.

When it came to elves the word "knee-high" leaped to mind, not just because that was how tall they were but because each of their large, bald, blunt-featured heads sitting atop a bull neck looked like a sturdy if battered knee atop a sturdy leg.

Seton's dream had always been to work with elves to make the world a better place by rewarding the good little boys and girls at Christmas. He remembered standing grade-school proud in the curly-toed shoes and pointed plastic ear-tips of a Santa's Little Helper, j. g. In high school he headed up the local Teens for Santa club, leading the YFS bully-boys when they stomped through the Big Bunnyites' Easter Egg hunts, shouting San-ta! San-ta! His efforts had not gone unnoticed. After high school the elves had offered him a scholarship to Holly Boughs Hall.

All that had been years ago. And now here he was Santa. How bitter the name sounded.

"Now for the next item on the agenda," said Quintillian. Every eye turned upward and every eye scowled. Seton stood there in the stony silence. As always, their concentrated gaze made him feel clumsy and gross, his hands and feet gigantic. What were they waiting for? Then Quince, the closest thing to a friend Seton had on the council, rolled his eyes upwards. Seton remembered he was still wearing his red cap with the white tassel. He snatched it off and clutched it to his chest. Damn.

After a moment Quintillian leaned back, locked his fingers behind his head, and said, "This has become something of an annual event, gentlemen. Once again Claus here comes before us with a request for an increase in salary. You will find a copy of his letter in your folders."

While the council elves hunted out the letter, Quintillian asked Seton, "Didn't you know what the salary was when you signed on for the job?"

Seton struggled to keep his temper. These arrogant little bastards liked to put it to the big guy. But Quintillian was the worst of all. "Yes, sir, Mr. Quintillian, sir," he admitted. "But I was counting on the piecework bonuses to get by. You know, as the number of good little boys and girls grows and I deliver more presents, I make more money."

"So what's your complaint?"

"The number of good little boys and girls isn't growing."

"Is that our fault?" demanded Quintillian.

Seton hung his head, shuffled his feet, and ran the hem of his cap through his fingers.

"Know what your problem is, Claus?" demanded Quintillian. "You've got this attitude thing. That's your problem. Every dumb clown who puts on a Ronald McDonald suit may think he runs a fast-food empire. But he doesn't. You swagger around here in your getup like you own the place. Well, think again. It's elves who pay for those toys you scatter about so freely. It's elves who pay for the clothes on your back." Quintillian curled his tiny lip and struck the table with his tiny fist. "And don't you ever forget it!"

"No, sir, Mr. Quintillian, sir." In fact, Seton had to hand it to the elves. Their ingenious sales promotions and licensing scheme for the 'Santa and Santa's little helpers paraphernalia line bankrolled the whole Christmas business.

Quintillian pointed a warning finger. "In these difficult economic times there may well have to be corporate belt tightening. I've already asked the elf council to double up on their duties. I'd be less than frank if I didn't tell you that the Concern is considering downsizing Santa."

"Downsizing" was the elves' buzz word of the moment. "But how do you downsize Santa, sir?" asked Seton. "You've only got one."

"Maybe we go to two part-time Santas. Minimum wage, no health care, no pension, no paid vacations."

"Would that mean two Mrs. Clauses?" asked Seton, his tone slipping into sarcasm. "Or would the part-time Santas share one?"

"Actually," said Quintillian, "we've been talking about eliminating Mrs. Claus completely."

Seton's jaw dropped. "Celebrate Santas?"

"Ho, ho, ho," said Quintillian sourly. Then he turned to Seton's letter. "I call the council's particular attention to the next to last paragraph where Claus here implies he'll walk out on his contract if we don't give him a raise. Now, gentlemen, I consider myself a good judge of manflesh. Frankly, I don't think he's got the guts to leave us. Why don't we just see."

Quintillian looked back up at Seton. "Assume the position," he ordered.

Seton swallowed. He'd hoped it wouldn't come to this. But it had. He pulled his left pant leg out of its boot until the elasticized cuff was above the knee.

While the other elves watched with interest, Quirt, the elf technology chief, came over to Seton's bare leg, turned the visor of his

hat to the back, and stood at Seton's kneecap like a U-boat captain at his periscope. Elves believe the kneecap is a deep porthole into the soul where they can read every man's hopes and fears. "Ready," announced Quirt.

Quintillian smiled and said, "Now, Claus, come clean. Will you really leave us if we don't give you a raise?"

Seton took a deep breath. I'll beat them this time, he told himself. Out loud he said. "I'll take a hike, sir." And he repeated this phrase over and over again under his breath like a mantra.

Quirt stared deep into the kneecap. A moment later he denied Seton's words with a curt shake of his head.

Damn, thought Seton. They got me again.

Quintillian pursed his lips and said, "All right, Claus, enough of this foolishness. You'll do your job under the terms of your contract. Now, fix your clothes."

Beaten, Seton pulled down his pant leg and waited to be dismissed.

"Isn't there something else you want to tell us?" asked Quintillian.

When Seton shook his head, the elf sighed and said, "In that case, I think Mr. Quoin has something the council should see. Mr. Quoin?"

Quoin wore the rubber-lugged footprint epaulets of elf security. Back before television security, elves would stand on each other's shoulders to peek through keyholes during the naughty-or-nicing check, or "norning," as the elves called it. Today they used a "norn" chip installed inside every television set to monitor children's behavior. Quoin slid a tape into the VCR component of the council chamber television.

Seton's living room appeared on the screen as if viewed through yesterday's football game. There was Drucker in his chair. There was Seton, heading for the kitchen to freshen their drinks. Before he could protest this invasion of his privacy, Seton saw his brother-in-law cross furtively to the small drop-topped desk and rifle through the papers there. As he watched, the man took out a small camera and photographed the same expense account Seton had just delivered to the elf cashier. Then, hearing his brother-in-law returning, Drucker closed the desk and pretended to admire the landscape on the wall.

"Who is this person?" demanded Quintillian.

"He's my brother-in-law," said Seton.

"A hotshot reporter for *Night Soil*," added Quoin.

"The evening scandal sheet?" asked Quintillian.

Quoin nodded gravely. "We hear they've got a debunking-Santa issue in the works. AN ELF FATHERED MY CHILD, SAYS SPINSTER LIBRARIAN. That sort of thing."

"She should be so lucky," muttered Quintillian, his mind elsewhere. After a moment he looked up at Seton and said, "You know our traditions. Santas are like hangmen. Nobody's supposed to know their real identity. I'd advise you to stop your brother-in-law. If he names you in a Santa exposé, we'll send you back to the Minors or trade you to the trolls so fast you'll get there a week before your beard does. Do I make myself clear, Claus?"

Seton left the meeting angry, humiliated, and desperate for a cigarette. But smoking wasn't allowed in the main building. The elves were dead against it. "Afraid it's going to stunt your growth?" he always wanted to ask. But you don't say "stunt" around elves. Seton headed for the front door, meaning to grab a smoke outside on the steps. But it was raining smartly. So he sprinted over to the stable. Standing inside the large open doorway, he lit up and watched the rain.

The wet exercise field reminded Seton of his own basic training there, doing sit-ups and push-ups in threes with his fellow classmates, shouting out a ho-ho-ho cadence to deepen their laughter. He remembered sitting out there at attention on folding chairs, after the lectures on flue theory and reindeer aerodynamics, while the elf drill sergeants walked among them shouting, "Laps, gentlemen! Laps!" as they sucked in their stomachs to accommodate the maximum number of invisible children on their knees. He remembered the graduation ceremony, when he led the other cadets past the reviewing stand to the swirl of the elves' massed bagpipe bands.

After graduation Seton worked several years in the Minors as a department-store Santa. The elves' scouting reports on him were good. Woodley, the Santa of the moment, looked and smelled like a beer barrel and had lectured Seton and the others on jollity from under an immense hangover. When the old guy wore out his welcome at Holly Boughs Hall by getting blotto at the after-Christmas office party and patting Quintillian on the top of his head, Seton was chosen to replace him. How happy he'd been when the elves signed the warrant permitting him to grow the full beard, the mark of the real Santa! How proud Estelle had been, even

though she was a retiring person and the Mrs. Claus end of things was a considerable burden on her.

But being Santa Claus wasn't anything like Seton expected. He'd never figured the elves would be so hard-nosed. Considering their history, perhaps he should have. During the Great Celestial Disharmony when Lucifer and his saxophone-playing minions had tried to drown out the very harps of heaven and had been cast down into hell for prideful discordance, the elves had chosen to keep themselves and their bagpipes above the fray. For this musical haughtiness they were banished down to earth and admonished to learn humbler ways. And the average elf—the stable elf, the gardener, the gatekeeper—had. But when it came to middle management and the council, all Seton could remember was the saying that the higher the monkey goes up the tree, the more you see of its ass. And the worst of all was Quintillian. Seton winced, remembering the Ronald McDonald crack.

Anyway, so what to do? He thought of confronting his brother-in-law, admitting who he was, and begging him, for his sister's sake, not to publish the story. But he knew Drucker would only laugh in his face.

For a moment Seton's mind turned to a handgun he'd picked up a couple of Christmases back. This guy must have heard the thump of reindeer on the roof, thought cat burglar, and gone for his gun in the bedside table. Then he lay there, waiting for the intruder to show himself and get blown away. But by the time Seton got down the long chimney the guy'd fallen back asleep with the handgun on his chest. Seton figured he'd better take it. What if the guy rolled over in his sleep and shot himself?

So now Seton had a handgun. But he wasn't going to use it. He was Santa, after all.

Flicking the cigarette butt out into the rain, Seton went back to the reindeer stalls. He spoke to the animals by name and fed them macaroons from a stash he kept up in the rafters, away from the stable elves, who liked their sweets.

Then he went into the deeper darkness of the carriage house, where the sleighs were, and swung himself up onto the driver's bench of Santa One. Listening to the rain on the tin roof, he lit up another cigarette. By match light he saw he was not alone. A young, clean-shaven man in a Santa suit sat at the other end of the bench watching him. Oh great, thought Seton, realizing who the young man was.

"Mr. Seton, my name's Dave Muncie. I really like your work."

"You my replacement?" said Seton, ignoring the outstretched hand.

"Your understudy, you mean, sir? I guess. They brought me up from the Minors, you know, just in case. So I've been practicing my chimney work and getting to know the reindeer. Hey, they sure like those macaroons."

Seton grunted.

"I guess it's bad luck, our meeting like this," said Muncie.

Seton shrugged. The Concern had a tradition that Santas and their replacements never meet. But it didn't look like he was going to be Santa much longer.

"I admire the dignity you've brought to the part," said Muncie. "And I'm not just being nice. Oh, I know the belly-shaking-like-jelly bit is that new silicon gut. But that thing you do with the eyes, nobody can fake that."

Seton looked over at the young man. After a moment he smiled and offered his hand. "I call it a twinkle," he explained. "What I wanted to capture was the way a kid's face lights up on Christmas morning as reflected in Santa's eyes."

"Wow!" said Muncie in an admiring voice.

"I worked damn hard to get it down pat," said Seton.

The two of them sat there, staring forward into the shadows for a while. "The money's lousy, you know," said Seton.

"You're telling me," laughed Muncie. "No problemo. I inherited a bit. Not much. But enough to get by."

"You're lucky."

"Maybe not. I never figured the background check would be this thorough. I'm not going to make it. The truth is, my wife doesn't believe in Santa Claus."

"Kid," explained Seton with a smile, "Mrs. Claus isn't about belief. All the elves want is a Mrs. Claus who's a good role model, a family type."

"I guess I didn't make myself clear," said Muncie. "I mean my wife doesn't believe there is a Santa Claus. So awhile back, when I told her I was making a career change and starting Santa courses at night out here at Holly Boughs Hall, she says, like sure, Santa Claus. She figures I'm handing her a line. She figures I'm playing around with another woman. So she starts seeing other men. A lot of other men. Right about now I guess she falls about as short of Mrs. Claus material as she can get."

"What about a divorce? Lots of Mrs. Claus types out there ready to snatch up a bachelor Santa."

Muncie shook his head. "My lawyer says the divorce settlement would clean me out. And I just can't get by on Santa wages. So today I thought I'd come out here one last time to sit and dream about what might have been. It's tough losing out when you've come this close."

"Tell me about it," said Seton. And then, to his surprise, he found himself explaining his own predicament with his brother-in-law. He even told about the handgun, adding a rueful, "I wonder if I'm the first Santa who ever thought about murdering his brother-in-law?"

"Don't take it so hard," said Muncie. "Murder crossed my mind a couple of times, too. But I couldn't go through with it. The husband's always the first one they suspect."

"Or the brother-in-law," said Seton. "And you know what the cons do to Santas in prison."

Muncie shuddered. He knew. "So the secret's not getting caught, right? What a guy with a handgun needs to pick up is a silencer."

"Yeah, sure," laughed Seton drily. "Santa doesn't travel much in those kinds of circles."

"Funny thing," said Muncie, "one year we had this substitute shop teacher, Mr. Ferguson, and silencers were all he had us make. When the mob gunned him down in the parking lot, the headlines said he was Joey-the-Rat Rattoni, late of the Federal Witness Protection program. Funny thing, you, you've got a handgun. Me, I've got a great tool shop in the basement and could make us a silencer overnight. You, you've got a brother-in-law. Me, I've got a wife. What does it all add up to?"

For several long moments they looked ahead into the darkness as if each was imagining his last ride on the wonderful sleigh. Then they both started talking at once.

The plan was simple enough. Muncie would kill Seton's brother-in-law. Seton would kill Muncie's wife. No one could connect them. No one even knew they knew each other, not even the elves. They would never meet again. Each would warn the other beforehand so solid alibis could be established.

The only question that remained was which one of them would kill first. They decided to flip a coin. Seton lost the toss.

Heading back home in his car, Seton began to have serious doubts. Not about the plan or the fact that he had just arranged to have his brother-in-law killed. Seton had never cared much for the man. At the same time, considering the difficulty of finding work at Seton's age in the current job market, Drucker's exposé posed a

serious threat to his life and livelihood. Nor was he bothered that Drucker's murder would hurt his wife deeply. She was already long-suffering, and if anyone was equipped to take on more tragedy it was Estelle.

What really bothered Seton was killing Mrs. Muncie, a woman he had never met and who, whatever her morals, had never done him any harm. He was Santa, after all, and murdering her came close to crossing the line between nice and naughty.

But in spite of these misgivings, Seton stopped at a shopping mall where he had never gone before and wrote down a number from the brace of public telephones to one side of the supermarket door. Then he drove home.

Estelle smiled up at him from the couch where she was watching a television game show. He could smell the casserole in the oven. He poured himself a stiff drink, something he rarely did during the week, and sat down by the phone. To pass the time until Muncie called he watched Estelle's program. After a minute he sat bolt upright and eyed the screen suspiciously. Were the elves watching him? Was he being "norned" from behind the spinning game wheel? Seton jumped to his feet. "I'm expecting a call," he told his wife. "I'll take it in the kitchen. I haven't taken a call in the kitchen for a long time." A few minutes later the phone rang. It was Muncie. They exchanged phone booth numbers and worked out times for future communications.

Seton returned to the living room. "That was Mr. Quintillian, dear," he felt obliged to explain. "He wanted to go over some toy purchase numbers with me."

"I'm so happy you two are getting on better," she replied. "Such a nice little man."

That evening Seton slept very badly. After midnight he went downstairs to sit in the darkness with a drink and struggle with his moral dilemma. Murder was one thing. But now a new element had entered the equation. Conspiracy by its nature breeds suspicion. And suspicion breeds treachery. So Seton had to ask himself what assurance he had, if he murdered first, that Muncie would carry out his end of things. Why should he? If Seton was in Muncie's shoes what would he do? Seton's answer to this question did not reassure.

The next night, at the time arranged, Seton visited the shopping mall and dialed the number Muncie had given him. "I've thought over our little business and I don't want to go through with it."

Instead of the argument Seton expected, Muncie said, "Hey, no problemo. Crazy idea, right? Let's forget the whole thing."

Left off balance by this lack of resistance, Seton explained, "Maybe they'll only send me back to the Minors or trade me to the trolls."

"The Minors don't sound too bad," Muncie agreed.

Seton stroked his beard. Not to you, you little rat, he thought. You're next in line to be Santa if you can get somebody else to kill the Missus or find the guts to do it yourself. Out loud he admitted, "I'm not crazy about the troll part."

"Yeah, like wearing gauze wings and a tutu," agreed Muncie. "And you'd have to shave your legs."

During the Great Celestial Disharmony the trolls had been cast down to earth because of their down-to-earth sins of belching and scratching as well as their ungodly attachment to accordion music. For centuries they had lived here in obscurity, feeding on billy-goat meat and sheltering themselves under bridges until one day a prophet arose among them proclaiming they must seek redemption by working for the betterment of others. Take inspiration from your beloved bridges, he told them. Go into charity work in the dental field. This admonition led to the formation of the troll accordion orchestra, which played at wakes and weddings fronted by a human female-impersonator vocalist dressed up as the Tooth Fairy. All profits from these performances went to the Tooth Fairy Pillow Fund.

After a pause Muncie asked, "So how about this? Would it make you feel any better about our little arrangement if I murdered first? You know, as a sign of good faith."

The next day Seton wrapped the handgun in plastic and left it in the hollow tree in the park as they had agreed. By mid week Muncie phoned. Seton was to have an alibi set for the following Monday evening.

As he left the phone booth Seton noticed that the mall had a travel agency. Why not make a vacation of it? One perk of being Santa was the use of the small hunting lodge in Scotland where the elves went for rest and recreation. The elves felt very much at home in the land of the bagpipe and the kilt, that kneecap-gazing paradise where they could wander among innocent Scottish dreams of oatmeal, haggis, and sheep. In fact, out of uniform, elves preferred plaid slacks. No office party was complete without two elves in plaid slacks stripping to the waist, standing side by

side with their legs together, holding a plaid lamp shade over both their heads, and claiming to be Rob Roy's bottom half.

So Seton maxed out the credit cards and the next day Thistle-down Air was carrying him and his surprised wife to Scotland. On the fourth day a polite, uniformed officer came to the hunting lodge door with the news that Mrs. Seton's brother had been murdered. The Setons returned home on the next flight.

According to the police, on the evening in question Drucker brought a woman, a gutter-press groupie, back to his apartment and surprised an intruder who shot and killed them both. There was no sign of forced entry, which puzzled the police, Drucker being known as a careful man who always locked his door. Seton wasn't surprised they didn't think of the chimney. Policing wasn't the kind of work you went into if you believed in Santa Claus.

With Drucker dead, Seton's ethical dilemma took on a different shape. Muncie had lived up to his side of the bargain, could Santa do any less? But then the police arrested the husband of Drucker's dead companion and charged him with the double homicide. It seemed the man, suspecting his wife was having an affair, had threatened her before witnesses.

Seton waited, hoping Muncie would step forward to confess and save an innocent man from being tried for his crime. It was, Seton decided, what Santa would have done in Muncie's case. When Muncie did not, Seton had to shake his head at the thought that such a man might one day succeed him as Santa Claus. However, a deal was a deal. With a sigh Seton prepared to kill Muncie's wife.

He knew from Muncie that she rendezvoused with her current boyfriend at his place on Mondays and Thursdays, which were Muncie's bowling nights. Either night would be an ideal time to do the deed because Muncie would have his whole bowling team as an alibi. Seton drove by the address once or twice, the last in a line of row houses across from a city park. He decided the job was going to be a piece of cake. Then he contacted Muncie and set things up for the next bowling night. The following morning he recovered the handgun and the silencer from the hollow tree where Muncie had placed it.

On the night in question Seton, dressed in soot-gray sweats and ski mask, parked in the next street over from the boyfriend's. The last row house was separated from an old brick Queen Anne by a narrow passageway out to the street. It was like chimney work. With his back on the row-house wall and his feet on the Queen Anne, Seton pushed himself all the way up to the roof.

While he waited there on the shingles beside the chimney, Seton thought he saw someone across the street in the darkness of the park. It was the figure of a child in a raincoat standing at the edge of the dim circle of light from a lamppost. Seton frowned. But just then Mrs. Muncie pulled up and his mind went elsewhere.

After a moment the lights came on in the bedroom beneath him, reflecting on the tree in front of the house. Seton waited for things to begin. There was nothing like passion to conceal chimney noise. Santas know such things.

When the time was right, Seton slid down the chimney to the living room fireplace. He listened at the steps up to the bedroom and, assured that there was still a lot going on, he went over to the bar and made himself a drink. He was in no hurry. Let them have this final fun. When he'd finished, he wiped the glass and the bottle carefully, put the gun and silencer together, pulled the ski mask down over his face, and moved quietly up the steps.

From then on things moved pretty fast. He kicked in the bedroom door and snapped on the light. She was the first to untangle herself. "What the . . ." she said before he shot her twice. "Who the . . ." the man said. Seton could have let him live. But there was something about his chest hair and thick neck chain that offended. Seton shot the man twice. After all, Muncie had killed two. Santa didn't want to be accused of giving short measure.

Seton had planned to leave by the front door if the coast was clear. But when he cracked it open to peek out he saw the kid in the raincoat again, pacing back and forth under the lamppost across the street. Was there a familiar arrogance in that strut? Quintillian? Here? Had this been Muncie's dirty little plan all along, to set Seton up for murder with elves looking on? Even elves couldn't tolerate a homicidal Santa. Was that it? Seton meant to find out.

He went through the kitchen and out the back door of the house. The small yard was surrounded by a three-foot-high chain-link fence which he vaulted, tearing a trouser leg in the process. Then he hurried out to the street and crouched down between two parked cars. When the pacing elf turned his back, Seton dashed across to the darkness of the park and came up on him in a crouch from behind. He caught Quintillian's neck in the crook of his arm and stuck the gun to his temple. "What are you doing here, you little bastard?" he hissed.

After his initial surprise, the elf looked back over his shoulder and said with casual contempt, "Oh, it's only you, Claus. Well, if

you must know, I'm helping with the background check on the wife of your replacement. I told you we were all doubling up on our duties. If it's any of your business, she isn't really up to our standards. In fact, I'd have to say she's a whore. So if you stop your ham-fisted ways and let go of me you might just stay in your job for another Christmas."

Seton blinked and did what he was told.

Quintillian straightened his clothes. "You're a lummoX, Claus. All brawn, no brain. And for heaven's sake, stop waving that gun around. You're not going to use it, you gutless wonder. That's really why I find you so repellent."

"Goddamn you!" shouted Seton. Stuffing the handgun into his armpit, he grabbed the elf by the lapels of his raincoat and hurled him to the ground under the streetlight. Then he ripped his torn pant leg all the way up to his knee and, pointing the gun at his knee and then at Quintillian, he said, "I'll show you gutless wonder! I'm Santa, damn it! Get up here and see what you've made Santa into."

His face as red as a sprained knee, Quintillian glared at Seton and dusted off his clothes. "I don't like being manhandled," he said indignantly. "But yes, I'll look. I could use a good laugh." With these words the elf put his eye to Seton's kneecap, to the porthole to Seton's soul. In an instant the color fled the elf's face. Quintillian swallowed and looked up beseechingly. "Santa, please," he said.

Until that moment Seton hadn't known what he was going to do. But Quintillian's eyes told him. "Sure," he said. "Now it's Santa." Then he pulled the trigger.

Seton ran until he reached his car, where he sat breathing hard, trying to get his head together. I'm Santa and I've just murdered an elf, he told himself in mournful disbelief. But then he forced his mind to focus on more practical matters. Seton would be the elves' prime suspect when Quintillian's murder came to light. They all knew how much he hated the council chairman. And he didn't have a shred of an alibi for the time of death. What was he going to do?

When the answer to this question finally presented itself, it seemed a trivial act after all Seton had done recently. Some might even call it poetic justice.

In the parking lot beside the bowling alley, Seton identified Muncie's car from the Holly Boughs Hall decal on the windshield. He tossed the gun and silencer under the front seat, crossed to a phone booth, and called the police. He waited there until the

police car pulled into the lot. When he saw them find the weapon he dialed the bowling alley and asked for Muncie. When Muncie came on the line Seton, faking panic, told him there'd been a real foul-up and it was every man for himself.

The police had drawn their weapons and were starting their cautious approach to the bowling alley's front door just as Muncie burst through it. When he tried to run, the police called out to him to stop. When he didn't, they fired.

When Seton drove out to Holly Boughs Hall the next morning the headline on the newspaper on the seat beside him read: SANTA WANNABE KILLS PROMINENT ELF. By the afternoon edition, sidebar headlines read: ELF KILLER MURDERED WIFE AND BOYFRIEND, TOO. MADE LOVE-NEST ENTRY DOWN CHIMNEY.

Only the proximity of Christmas prevented the elves from coming apart completely over Quintillian's murder. Under Quince's direction they set about in the busy weeks that followed to complete preparations for the annual distribution of presents, working with numb efficiency. But the strain was great. On Christmas Eve, for example, the makeup elf who whitened Seton's beard became hysterical and had to be led away in tears.

That was the first Christmas sleigh ride when Seton encountered barrage balloons in municipal skies to discourage rooftop landings.

After Christmas Seton heard promises of more money. But nothing materialized. That spring Minor Brothers department stores backed off from sponsorship of the Holly Boughs Hall courses for Santa clones and enrollment dropped precipitously. To keep the program going the elves had to admit candidates they would not normally have considered. Halfway through the course, the elves and Santa got another black eye when several trainees were arrested as part of a shoplifting ring working department stores. That was the end of the training program.

It wasn't turning into a good year for Seton's private life either. His wife, who had never recovered from the death of her brother, filed for divorce and ran off to an ashram. Seton lost the house and had to move into an efficiency apartment above a shoe-repair shop. He had a vision of becoming a swinging bachelor Santa and playing the field. But in spite of all the bad publicity, the singles bars were still full of guys dropping hints that they were Santa Claus to make it with the girls. So he stayed home a lot. But since

he couldn't watch television without imagining the dead Quintilian "norning" him, he spent long hours sitting in the dark, brooding over the whisky bottle.

He had reason to brood. The following Christmas Seton noted a marked fall-off in toy quality. Even the elf loaders and packers looked downcast and ashamed. That was the year razor-wire chimney liners became popular. Seton lost much time tossing pebbles up at children's windows so he could show them where he was leaving their presents.

By the end of January Quince reported to the elf council that advance orders on Santa and Santa's little helpers gear were far below projections. "That Muncie kid really did a job on us," he admitted. But he assured them it would all blow over.

By February it was common knowledge that for next year the toy manufacturers were calling for their money up front. There were rumors the elves would consolidate their business into a small mail-order operation focusing on selling ear-tip prostheses to the Trekkie market out of a warehouse in a low-rent district. According to some, the trolls would buy Holly Boughs Hall as the site of Tooth Fairyland, a dental theme park/beer garden combination where parents could go and hoist a few while the kids roamed the rides and exhibits.

The same day in March when Quince assured him Tooth Fairyland would never, never happen, Seton was crossing the compound when a stretch limo pulled in through the gate and a half-dozen trolls in shiny suits and clipboards got out and walked around waving their arms, talking about where they'd put the palace of Flossy, Queen of the Tooth Fairies, and where they'd put Davy Jones's Chopper Locker, the six-story-high aquarium built like a giant water glass with an immense denture resting on the bottom through whose smile marine life would sport and frolic.

Seton went back to his cubicle, cracked open the whisky, and, drink in hand, started clearing out his desk. Later, when he looked out the window, he saw a stable elf leading out the reindeer and trotting them around in a circle in front of the admiring trolls. He wondered what was going on. Then he remembered reading somewhere that the meat of macaroon-fed reindeer resembled goat. By the time Quince came to tell him the bad news, there was nothing to tell.

A week later, a hungover Seton in full kit took the salute standing knee to head with Quince as the whole elf contingent, led by lamenting bagpipes, slow-marched out of Holly Boughs Hall.

When Seton and Quince followed behind them they were almost run over by vans filled with trolls careening into the compound. The trolls waved their beer mugs, jeered at Seton and the elves, and made rude gestures. The vans were followed by a flatbed truck carrying the troll orchestra and their mother-of-pearl accordions. (You've never really been mooned until a troll does it to you from the back of a flatbed truck.)

Seton had parked farther down the road, beside a line of buses waiting to pick up the elves. When they reached his car Quince looked up at him and said, "Well, good luck. I hope things work out for you, you big lug," and he made a mock roundhouse punch at Seton's kneecap. "You were the best. And, hey, never lose that eye thing you do."

"I call it a twinkle," Seton said, and started to explain what he had tried to capture. But he stopped. That part of his life was over.

Just then a bus driver honked. The vehicles were loaded and ready to go. Quince hurried toward the bus door. Then he turned and said, "Hey, I almost forgot. I hear the Big Bunnyites are hiring. You might look into it." Quince opened his mouth as if to add something else. Then he shook his head. Naw. "Keep the Santa suit," he called. Then he vanished inside the vehicle and the buses moved off.

Seton stood there by the side of the road watching the elves go. The late morning lay warm on his face. But the breeze still carried a touch of winter. Seton went over to his car. There was two inches of whiskey in the pint bottle in the glove compartment. Seton stood in the road and drank it in one gulp. Then he threw the bottle away. It made a mellow plop in the green water in the ditch beside the road, startling a red-winged blackbird from the reeds.

Seton wiped his mouth on his red sleeve and came around the car to the driver's seat. Okay, so the Big Bunnyites were hiring. Maybe he'd drop by. Maybe. But they'd better be looking for egg decorators or chocolate molders because he sure wasn't going to put on the big ears. No, sir, not him. He'd been Santa, after all. And he wasn't going to turn himself into a carrot-eating geek in a bunny suit, not for anything or anybody. ●

WHERE DO THE BALLOONS GO?

by William Link

Mickey Matrano was a gambler. Mickey gambled on anything and everything: Indiana-Orlando basketball, the dog races in Miami, whether the next person coming in a restaurant would be a man or a woman. Nick the Greek had told him that everything in life was six to five against, but that didn't stop Mickey from being an incorrigible optimist where gambling was concerned.

Even in the case of Craig Detweiler.

Poker was the game and Craig was down to him for eleven K. Or eleven large as some of the other incorrigibles liked to say. Mickey figured

that if Craig (an only child) didn't have it, at least Mom did. Mom was eighty-two, a Locust Valley real estate heiress, and the word on the street was she was suffering from inoperable and terminal cancer of the pancreas.

So Mickey decided to pay a call on young Craig, who had a nice showy bachelor's pad on upper Park Avenue. Zebra-striped cushions like the old El Morocco, leather-padded bar, Erté prints in black-lacquer frames, daunting wraparound views of the metropo-

Speaking of William Link's longtime collaboration with Richard Levinson in the creation of TV mysteries,

Encyclopedia Mysteriosa says:

"More than any other writers in the medium, [they] were committed to the classical aspects of the mystery story: the clues and the solutions." But in his solo work for *EQMM*, Mr. Link mostly departs from the classical clued mystery to create fascinating psychological studies. †

lis. Sometimes, mysteriously, furniture and prints were conspicuously missing, like articles removed from a showroom, and the apartment had an echoing funereal air while multiple white phones rang endlessly and Craig sucked joints and pretended everything was hunky-dory.

Today everything seemed normal, no blank spaces in the decor. Craig was wearing one of his Cuban bolero shirts, which hung over his white linen trousers. He was a big blond guy with old eyes in a baby face framed by a Scandinavian beard.

He greeted Mickey with a crushing handshake, leaving his fingers tingling. "Welcome, amigo. How 'bout a taste?"

Mickey was still sweating from the summer heat, wearing his usual suit and tie. He removed his straw hat with the flowered band and palmed sweat from his bald spot. He was sixty-seven and starting to feel a certain slowness, the deceleration that came with the years. "A Chivas and short-water would be fine."

Craig went behind the bar. "What's this 'short-water'? Some kinda hip new expression?"

Mickey laughed. "Old as the hills. Thing we heard in South Philly growing up. It's how the swells ordered—just a classy way of saying a chaser."

Craig had lost interest; it was as if everything in his world was just another channel on his inner remote. He made Mickey his drink and then produced an extra-fat joint from his shirt pocket, torching it up with a new gold lighter. When he handed Mickey the scotch he noticed there was plenty of vibrato (as the jazzmen say) on his hand. Craig was one nervous fella this morning.

Mickey took his glasses over to the glass slab of a coffee table and eased himself down on the zebra-striped sofa. He slowly sipped his scotch, letting the silence settle in, biding his time, watching Craig nervously take another toke on his economy-sized joint. The gunmetal gray venetian blinds were slanted against the hot metallic light outside and the sound of multiple sirens suddenly corkscrewed up from the street—police or emergency vehicles.

Craig came around the coffee table, slow as a water buffalo, as if the grass had already put him in a state of hyponoia. He sat down heavily across from Mickey, breathing deeply like an emphysemic. He extended the joint over the table. "Wanna hit?"

"No, thanks," Mickey said. "I don't mix medications."

Craig shrugged. "Forgot." Closer, he looked dissipated, gray, a night creature caught in the hard headlights of noon.

"Eleven K," Mickey said, friendly. He didn't like the young man's pallor; maybe he should be in the hospital like Mom. "When do I get it?"

"I'm a little short these days." A laugh. "Like your water, amigo."

Mickey purposefully didn't smile. He sipped his drink.

"Wanna refill?" Craig asked. He was making a serious effort to keep things light, congenial.

Mickey nodded and Craig went back to the bar, returning with the bottle of Chivas. He poured Mickey a healthy portion and set the bottle on the coffee table between them. He took another soul-satisfying toke.

"Getting stoned isn't going to help," Mickey warned.

"I can handle it."

There were more sirens in the street, harsh scissors cutting into the fabric of their silence.

Craig made a face. "I hate that sound. There was a fire in my neighborhood when I was a kid. One of those hook-and-ladder trucks ran over my dog."

"When?" Mickey asked after a pause.

"When? Mid sixties, I must've been five or six."

"I meant, when am I getting my money?"

Craig tried a smile. "Oh. That."

Mickey let him chew on it. He knew the marijuana was tamping down the fear, slowly smothering it with a safe layer of euphoria. Craig had set the joint carefully on the edge of the table. Mickey reached over, picked it up, and dropped it into his glass of water.

Craig's reaction was on tape-delay. "Hey," he said finally. "You drowned my roach. Why did you do that?"

"This is a business conversation, amigo. We're not just two old friends sitting around killing time shooting the breeze."

Craig was staring at Mickey's straw hat, which was sitting on the cushion next to him. "What is that thing?" Craig laughed. "Circa nineteen thirty? It dates you, Mickey. My grandfather used to wear a hat like that. Christ, that band with the cockamammy flowers looks like a sarong or something."

"Next time I'll wear a baseball cap with the bill turned around backwards. Isn't that how the street punks wear them?"

Craig looked mournfully at the roach floating like a small dead

gardenia in the glass. "Next you'll be saying you're going to wear it to my funeral."

"Who said anything about a funeral?" He realized that he had miscalculated Craig's state of intoxication: This was a guy who started on the grass when the alarm went off in the morning.

"You're a very deceptive dude," Craig said, the not very friendly smile back in his beard. "You come shuffling up here with your straw hat and tie, nice as pie, like you're the whole world's grandpa. But if I don't settle up you go talk to one of your 'collectors.' And if I don't pay them—I come out of a disco some night and somebody puts a Glock to the back of my haircut."

There were more sirens, adding to the commotion thirty stories down in the chasm of the street.

"Isn't that how it works?" Craig asked. "All over a stinking measly eleven K."

He had unconsciously raised his voice over the growing cacophony outside, to which was now added the deep bass admonitions of a bullhorn.

"How's your mom?" Mickey asked.

"Not good. They don't think she'll last the month."

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, well, she's had a pretty good life, all things considered. I mean, on good days, when she's up to it, she's getting takeout from Le Bernadin. If you're gonna live in style I guess you gotta die the same way."

Mickey smiled sympathetically, not sure whether there were any species of sincerity in Craig's comment. He decided not to ask the obvious question, preferring to let the son bring it up himself.

"Of course, once she assumes room temperature I'll be coming into a pile of money." He grinned conspiratorially as if Mickey were in the will too.

Mickey finished the scotch. "Estates take a long time to clear up."

"Don't worry about it. I'll be getting advances from the bank."

"So you're asking me to wait."

The decibel level had gotten higher. Annoyed, Craig jumped up and went over to the window. With a surprisingly quick movement he lashed up on the blinds—instantly revealing a startling scene across the way. Interested, Mickey got up and joined him at the window.

A young woman was standing on the ledge of an office building

directly opposite their condominium. Even at this distance she looked fairly well dressed, a secretary or assistant from one of the offices, a dark-haired, dark-complected woman, probably a Latina.

"Jumper," Craig muttered. They both looked down simultaneously at the burgeoning crowds of pedestrians and emergency vehicles far below on the street. Across from them police were hanging out of a window trying to talk to or distract the woman, but to no avail. She was pressed against the stone face of the building, arms outstretched, staring down, seemingly fascinated by the crowds and activity that she herself had created.

"This city's got some kinda record for crazies," Craig said. "Let'er jump if that's what she wants."

"Where's your compassion?" Mickey asked, digging him.

"At Lennox Hill Hospital. I got a dying mother, remember?" He seemed mesmerized by the woman on the ledge; a cop started to climb out of the window and the woman frantically waved him back.

Craig started to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

Craig turned from the window. There were bright stars of merriment in his grass-dulled eyes. "Wanna make a bet?" he asked Mickey.

Nothing amazed Mickey anymore. "What do you mean? Bet on—?"

"The jumper." He was back watching the scene on the ledge. Now the cops had opened another window nearer the young woman and a man in plainclothes was leaning out. The man's heavy-rimmed glasses flashed like a heliograph in the sun.

"Come on, Mickey," he teased. "You're the dude who's famous for betting on anything."

He had him there, the old man conceded to himself. He had even bet an L.A. chum how many houseflies he could kill in an hour—calculating his odds on the fact that California flies were slower than their Big Apple counterparts. Almost without thinking he said, "She won't jump."

Craig was suddenly, literally, in his face, so close Mickey could count the premature gray hairs in his Nordic blond beard. "Eleven K. If she jumps we're even-steven."

Mickey's foot was asleep; he had been standing too still too long. "You're on," he said and immediately felt like a goddamn fool.

Why was he taking on this stupid bet—trying to maintain his reputation as an indiscriminating gambling idiot?

The man with the glasses was talking to the woman, who was silent, rigid, keeping her own counsel.

"He's gotta be one of those police shrinks," Craig said. "Suicide-prevention guy."

"They know what buttons to press."

"Yeah, but she ain't buying. The only button she's gonna press is the one going *down*."

He went quickly back behind the bar and broke open a bottle of tequila.

"I thought you potheads didn't juice," Mickey said, rubbing the pins and needles from his leg.

Craig sloshed liquor into his glass. "It's like Sinatra said—booze, broads, cigarettes—whatever gets you through the night."

"Or the afternoon," Mickey said, still weighed down with misgivings. "She could be up there for hours."

"Somehow I think you'll stick around," Craig said. "If you came all the way over here to put the squeeze on me for eleven K, I really think you'll wait around to lose it."

"Who says I'm going to lose it?" The old competitive spark was back.

"That shrink's batting zip. I'd like to see his track record. You wanna bet he's lost more than he's won?"

The portable phone rang on the bar. Craig ignored it and it rang and rang, a torturous finger in their ears.

"Will you answer your goddamn phone?" Mickey said.

"It's a bookie. But he's got all the patience of a fruit fly. Two more rings and he'll fold."

It took three and the phone finally stopped. Craig was at the window again, pointing, laughing. "Lookit the pigeons—"

Mickey replenished his glass from the Chivas bottle. On an empty stomach he began to feel the effects of the alcohol, a slowly numbing drowsiness.

A little convoy of pigeons was calmly walking around the woman, searching for nonexistent food on the ledge. She barely noticed them, still intent on the activity below.

"Wanna increase the bet?" Craig asked later.

"No."

"Getting a little nervous?"

"They'll talk her in."

Craig had gone into the kitchen. He came out with a lime for his tequila and a knife. "Anything new?" he asked, not even glancing at the window.

"They got a TV camera now."

A T-shirted technician was aiming a mini-cam from the far window. The woman seemed oblivious that she was being shot, and if she noticed she didn't seem to care.

Craig was busy hunting around for the remote. He finally found it between two cushions on the sofa. "It's gotta be on one of the local stations," he said. "Those vultures are always downwind of a good story." He was clicking through the channels.

The phone began ringing again.

"If you're not going to answer it," Mickey said, "why don't you take the damn thing off the hook?"

Craig grinned. He had found nothing on the television and was now slicing wedges of lime on the bar. "I just wanna see how persistent this guy is."

"How many guys are you in to?"

"Few. Don't let it eat you up."

"Why don't you give them the inheritance story like you gave me?"

"You think it's all bull, a con job? My mom's not dying?"

"I didn't say that. I'm just saying it might get some of these guys off your back, buy you some time."

Craig lifted the bolero shirt, was scratching his hairless white belly. "You hungry? I'm getting these hunger pangs."

"It's the grass, amigo. Gets you ravenous."

Craig was genuinely puzzled. "But I didn't smoke that much—thanks to you."

Now it was Mickey's turn to jibe back: "Maybe it's the fear kicking in because they're going to talk her down."

"No way." He glanced out the window, where the woman was edging farther away from the window with the guy in the glasses. Even from a distance they could see the lines of frustration etched deeply on his face.

"You feel like some pizza?" Craig asked.

"Why not."

Craig picked up the phone. "Pepperoni? Anchovies?"

"No anchovies."

Craig called a neighborhood pizzeria and placed the order.

"They deliver pretty fast," he said after he hung up. "Unless they're all outside watching the jumper."

Time dragged on while they watched the woman on the ledge and waited for the delivery. The sun had shifted in the hot sky, no longer flashing on the shrink's glasses. The woman was a still-frame in the windless afternoon, a frozen enigma, new flocks of pigeons sauntering by her on their eternal scavenger hunt for food.

"Kids' balloons," Craig said after a long period of silence. He was stretched out on the barcalounger, hands laced behind his head, the glass of tequila squeezed in the V of his crotch.

Mickey sat on the window ledge, eyes fixed on the jumper, seeing her but not seeing her, a pinprick of headache puncturing the base of his skull. Why had he allowed himself to get trapped into this? Why hadn't he given the kid an ultimatum and split? He could have been right now at that poker game on Park Avenue with that old Broadway composer who was born a loser. Craig's words reverberated behind his headache: "Kids' balloons?" he repeated.

"Yeah," Craig said. "You always see these little kids with their mothers walking around with these balloons on a string. But they lose them and they float away."

"So?" Maybe he should have let Craig keep his joint. He was beginning to sound dopey on his tequila high.

"What I'm asking," Craig continued, "is where these balloons go. They go up but they never come down. Where have you ever seen a busted balloon on the ground? Condoms yes, balloons no."

Mickey strained to keep the sarcasm from his voice. "You know, I never really thought about that—where do the balloons go?"

"Up, up, and away," Craig said dreamily. "I once thought of calling the science editor of the *Times*. Maybe he would know." The phone was ringing again.

The man with the glasses was replaced by a balding, middle-aged guy in what looked like a blue-striped summer suit. He called something out to the woman, who jerked out of her immobility, startled by the new voice and its volume.

The phone stopped just as the doorbell rang. It was the pizza delivery, a curly-haired kid in a baseball cap with the bill turned around.

Craig checked out the pizza while the kid stared out the window

at the spectacle across the way. Craig said, "Carlo—you think she's gonna jump?"

Carlo shrugged his thin shoulders. "Dunno."

Craig was smelling the hot pie. "We'll bet. You put up the pizza."

Carlo's mouth twisted into a painful smile; he was wearing braces. "No, man. I don't bet with you."

Craig winked at Mickey. "But you *know* she won't jump, Carlo. My friend Mickey doesn't think so either."

"Leave the kid alone," Mickey said.

The kid held out a receipt and a rollerball pen. "No bets."

Craig laughed, hugged him, digging a bill from his pocket. "Here. You're getting smart, Carlo. Buy *la tua amica* some pizza."

He signed the receipt. Carlo started for the door, then turned back, hesitantly. "There was two men downstairs, Mr. Detweiler. They ask for you."

Craig's glances ricocheted off Mickey back to the delivery boy. "What did they want?"

"Want to come up. The doorman, Eddie—he say you was out."

"Good. That's what I told him to say." His expression tightened. "Did they see you with the pizza?"

"I say it was for Mrs. Gramiak in two-eight-two-nine." He looked at Craig expectantly, batting his dark sensuous eyes, and Mickey doubted if he had a *tua amica*.

Craig palmed him another bill. "Very good, Carlo. I told you you were getting smart."

After he let the boy out Craig clapped his hands, energized, bounced back to his shot of tequila.

"Who were the men, Craig? Why were they looking for you?"

"IRS. They've been giving me a lot of grief. Living in digs like this and next to no reported income. You never had trouble from them?"

"Now and then. But you can't keep putting them off. Sooner or later they'll nail you and it'll be even worse."

"By then I'll be rich," Craig laughed.

"Sure thing, right? Mom's going to buy the farm."

"Well, I won't go as far as pulling out the plug on her life-support system, if that's what you mean." His mood shifted, serious again. "We both know—don't we?—there's no such thing as a sure thing."

Their eyes drifted back to the window. Status quo on the ledge. Now there were people hanging out other windows, probably the

woman's office coworkers, trying to persuade her not to jump. The sky had darkened; everything seemed wrapped in a muggy haze. Even a few early lights had been turned on in the office building.

"Might rain," Craig observed. He was pulling off slices from the wheel of pizza, dumping them on plates from the kitchen cabinet. Mickey sat uncomfortably on a bar stool. The booze had become a co-conspirator with his headache, putting a damper on his appetite, and he regarded the gummy pizza with a growing distaste.

"If it does rain," Craig ruminated, "and she slips and falls—"

"I'm ahead of you."

"Like in the insurance policies—an act of God. I win."

As if to underline his words, a long peal of thunder shook the sky, rattling the windows. Heat lightning flared like a giant flashbulb. The woman, for the first time, looked up as if the massed density of clouds presented some impossible salvation for her.

"You're not eating," Craig observed, surprised.

"Lost my appetite."

Craig smiled maliciously. "Something I said?"

Mickey slid off the stool and went to the window. The telephone was ringing again, its stridency subsumed by another threatening roll of thunder.

He stared out across the abyss, across the sickening drop of space, as raindrops stung the window. Almost at that exact moment the young woman stared back at him, their eyes meeting with an inaudible click like a key going into a lock. The phone was still making its assaultive din—and Mickey saw the whole thing clearly, like a lightning flash, revealed for the first time. The jumper, the men asking for Craig, the inexorable ringing of the phone . . .

Before Craig could move from behind the bar, Mickey had reached out a long arm, snatched up the receiver—

A gruff male voice said, "Is this Mr. Detweiler, Craig Detweiler? We've been trying to contact you—"

Craig's hand hammered down, breaking the connection. Mickey could read the suppressed fear just behind the violence in his eyes. Craig had the presence of mind to take the receiver off the hook so they couldn't call back.

"You know that woman over there," Mickey said. "The way I see it, she was probably one of your girlfriends. You dumped her and she got suicidal. Does she work in that building right across from here?—that's how you met her, in one of the lunch places in the nabe, or even at your pizzeria?"

Craig was silent. A few more raindrops splattered the window as Mickey looked out again. It was eerie: It looked now as if the young woman was watching both of them.

"That wasn't your bookie calling all the time—that was the cops trying to reach her boyfriend because she or one of her coworkers told them you were the problem and maybe the only one who could save her. Am I right?"

Craig turned abruptly from the window, preferring to face Mickey's accusatory eyes, not the woman's.

"You bastard," Mickey said, no longer hiding his disgust. "You made a bet—and by not answering the phone, not talking to her, you practically insured that sooner or later she'd jump. The eleven K meant more to you than that poor broad's life."

He angrily slammed the receiver back on its hook, and Craig lunged for him, but he fought the young man away, silently, both breathing heavily.

"They came over here before and now they'll come back," Mickey panted, pushing Craig away, "because I answered the phone and they know somebody's here. For God's sake, Craig, talk to her, get her off that ledge!"

Craig sank down on the sofa, still breathing like a miler. He looked near tears. "My mother," he said in a choked voice, "the old bag, she cut me out of the will—she's sick to death of the gambling, the drugs—"

The phone began to ring.

"Answer it, Craig!"

His voice broke. "I—I owe ev'rybody—not just you. It's a freak-ing nightmare. I'm at the end of my rope, Mickey—!"

"Get on the phone and save her goddamn life!"

Craig's hand circled the phone, still hesitating. . . .

Mickey sighed, the headache pounding him, looking one last time at the solitary figure of the young abandoned woman on the ledge. "Forget the eleven K," he said wearily. "You don't owe me."

Craig's startled eyes looked at him, saw him nod affirmatively, and then he snatched up the phone.

As Mickey let himself out of the apartment, slumping, suddenly dead beat, he heard Craig's low voice on the phone. But a few seconds later, as he walked to the elevator, he was beginning to maybe catch his second wind. He wondered if he wasn't too late to get over to that composer's place on Park Avenue; maybe if the guy was as big a loser as they said he could make up the eleven K . . . ●

A COLD COMING

by H. R. F. Keating

It is someone urgent—urgent—wanting you. Some *angrezi* it is sounding like.”

Inspector Ghote was not sorry his wife calling out had cut short his morning shower. In December in Bombay the water has a distinct chill to it. He wrapped a towel round his middle and hurried to the telephone, feeling the cool stone of the floor on his bare feet.

An Englishman wanting him? But who?

And urgently . . . ?

“Ghote speaking.”

“Ah. Ah, thank God, it’s you. Henry Reymond here.”

Mr. Henry Reymond? The name was somehow half-familiar. Who the devil . . . ?

“Inspector? Inspector? Are you there? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, yes. I am hearing. Why not?”

“Well . . . Indian telephones.”

“Our system is one hundred percent first-class.”

Ghote had let himself voice some resentment. Who was this Westerner to decide that if something was Indian it must be inefficient, however much Bombay phones had once been a nightmare of crossed lines and sudden cutoffs?

And then some recollection of that half-concealed frigid disapproval told him who this Reymond Henry, Henry Reymond, was.

Yes. Years ago he had met the man. A noted British author, or so the papers had called him. In Bombay on some sort of exchange visit with an Indian author. And . . . And there had been a murder next-door to the flat the fellow had been lent. The Shivaji Park

Mr. Keating says of the series to which this story belongs: “While it provides a reasonably accurate picture of today’s India—a picture conditioned, I admit, by the fact that for the first 10 years I wrote about Ghote I had not actually visited his country—I like to think it puts a recognizable human being into . . . situations likely to happen to any of us.” †

case. And all those years ago he himself had been landed with no more than the task of keeping this Henry Reymond, who wrote, yes, crime stories, out of the way. The fellow had been being one damn nuisance. And he had gone on plaguing him all the time with his high-and-mighty questions—this and questions—that about every awkward aspect of Bombay life.

"Mr. Reymond," he brought himself to say—Indian hospitality must never be less than wholehearted—"you are altogether welcome here. You are in Bombay itself, yes?"

"No, no. I'm in Delhi. Er—New Delhi. I'm here on a tour for the British Council. Three of us poets."

"Poets? Were you saying you are poet? But I am thinking it is crime books you are writing. Some hero who is collecting something. Yes, shells. You are writing books wherein this shells-wallah is all the time solving very-very fantastic mysteries."

"Mr. Peduncle. My detective."

Now it was the Englishman's turn to sound offended.

"Yes, yes. I was once going through one of those books. *Mr. Peduncle Caught in the Meshes*. Very good."

"Ah yes. Well, thank you." The noted author seemed less hurt. "Well, you see, it's like this. A couple of years ago, finding the Peduncle books were bringing me in a rather decent income, I decided to try a bit of an experiment. I wrote a crime novel in verse. A long poem really. Set in India, actually. In the days of the Raj. And, well, because of it the British Council asked me to come on this tour."

"And you would be visiting Bombay also, yes?"

"Well, yes. Yes, eventually. Only . . . Well, this is what I'm ringing about actually. You see, I've been arrested."

"Arrested? But what for are they arresting?"

"It—It's—Well, the thing is, they think I've committed a murder."

"But why are they thinking such? And what for are you telling me this per telephone?"

"That's it. That's it exactly. You see, no one here would listen to me. Or to the chaps from the High Commission either. And then I remembered you. You're the only Indian police officer who's ever paid any real attention to anything I said."

Ghote remembered in his turn. How—warm Indian hospitality being day by day more and more worn away—he had battled and battled to find answers to those on-and-on damned questions.

"So that's why," the now familiar British voice went on, "I'd like

you to get on to the Head of Crime Branch here and tell him that he's being utterly ridiculous."

The words, in that bang-bang voice, had entered Ghote's ear. But it took several seconds, it seemed, before such an outrageous request entered his mind.

For him, for a simple inspector from Bombay, to telephone the Head of Crime Branch at the Centre and to tell him—To tell him what he was doing was utterly ridiculous. It—It—It would be like telling Bombay's number one film star he was incapable of acting, or, worse, of dancing.

"But, Mr. Reymond—But, sir . . . Sir, what you are asking is a marathon impossible thing. Hundred percent."

There was a long silence at the other end of the line.

And then the voice that came trickling into his ear was very different from the one he had heard up to then.

"Inspector . . . Inspector, please. Please, I didn't do it. Inspector, you know me. We knew each other well back then in Bombay. We were friends, weren't we? You know I'm not someone who could ever kill anybody."

Ghote thought.

What his bugbear of long ago had said was certainly true. Insofar as he could ever state that any human being was incapable of murder, he would have said it about the big, flabby, cucumber-cool, unexcitable Englishman he was recollecting more and more clearly with every passing minute.

So—the thoughts went click-clicking through his mind—if Mr. Henry Reymond, who was now, it seemed, a distinguished poet, had been arrested on suspicion of committing a murder which it was almost impossibly unlikely he had committed, then whoever was responsible in faraway Delhi was on the point of causing an international incident. The British newspapers would kick up one worldwide tamasha.

So . . . So, if there was anything he himself could do to get the business quietly forgotten, then it was up to him to do it. No one else in the whole of India probably knew more about Mr. Henry Reymond than he did.

And he thought that, just perhaps, there was something he could do. If he went to his own boss, Assistant Commissioner Pradhan, and explained to him what the situation was, then just possibly Mr. Pradhan might phone his opposite number at the Centre and convince him he ought to go much, much, much more carefully.

"Mr. Reymond," he said, "I will to my level best do what I can. Kindly await development."

So it was that, scarcely more than three hours later, Inspector Ghote found himself aboard an Indian Airlines plane bound for Delhi. He felt not a little confused. Never for a moment had he thought that trying to circumvent an international incident would mean he would be despatched himself without a moment to draw breath to the distant capital. And to do what? To somehow make sure, a task agreed to by the Head of Delhi Crime Branch, that a noted British author had beyond doubt not murdered one Professor V. V. Goswami. To disprove, in fact, the belief, held it seemed by the whole of the Delhi police, that Henry Reymond had committed murder in order to obtain possession of a certain valuable document—if just only one poem, hitherto unknown, handwritten by some deceased foreigner by the name of Eliot, Eliot with some initials in front, could possibly be so *maha*-valuable.

But when the plane swooped down to the airport and he stepped out onto the tarmac, a yet greater surprise awaited him. It was cold. Sharply and bitterly and horribly cold.

In an instant, shivering like the leaves of a pipal tree in his simple shirt and pants, he realised that, of course, he had read in the newspaper—Was it only yesterday? It somehow seemed already weeks away—that Delhi was in the grip of a colder than usual December. Bitingly chill air from the Himalayas mingling with the ever-increasing fumes of the capital's jockeying and jolting traffic had covered the city in freezing, immovable smog. Roofless beggars were dying from exposure by the dozen. Everyday life had come to almost as much of a standstill as it customarily did in the intensest heat of summer.

However, he had his duty. He marched off, flapping his arms round himself in a vain attempt to instill some interior warmth, and found an intrepid-looking Sikh taxiwallah.

"Police Headquarters," he barked out between chattering teeth.

"A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year for a journey and such a long journey . . . And the camels, dah-di-dah refractory."

What on earth was this Mr. Brian Quayne saying? Perhaps it had not been such a good idea to hear what the two other poets had to tell rather than talk first to his friend Mr. Henry Reymond, if friend he was.

"Please, I am not at all understanding. What it is, please, about camels that are—What was it you were stating? Refractory?"

"Well, Inspector," the paper-thin, chalk-faced, big-beaked poet said, blinking at him through a pair of round spectacles, "when we first arrived in Delhi we saw camels here and there. Can't say I was really expecting to, somehow. And if the wretched beasts weren't refractory in this awful cold, then I don't know why not. Even if old Tom Eliot was thinking of a slightly less freezing journey than ours. Sharp, that's what he says in the poem, after all. *The ways deep and the weather sharp*. Okay, I suppose, for stuff from the pre-Electronic Age."

Ghote felt he was beginning to glimpse a meaning in what the fellow was saying. But this poem he was quoting, was it the one Henry Raymond was suspected of murdering to get hold of or not? This Tom Eliot, was he, or was he not, the world-famous Eliot? The one with the initials. T something. T. F. Yes, T. F. Eliot.

But never mind all that.

"Yes, yes," he said, rapping it out impatiently, "such is all very well. But what I am asking, Mr. Quayne, is are you believing your fellow poet, Mr. Henry Raymond, was killing one Professor V. V. Goswami?"

"Damn it all, Inspector, it's totally obvious a fat idiot like Raymond would never have the guts to murder anyone. Unless it was one of the paper tigers he stuffed into that rhyming travesty he's so absurdly proud about."

"So what is it you are saying was happening?"

"The whole business is totally absurd. How I got caught up in it, I'll never know. The foremost poet, though I say it, of the Electronic Age. Beating my brains out to produce work with all the implacable logic of the computer, and I find myself involved in a ludicrous business about us all having to hide our copies of some ridiculous book and then having them all found and brought back to us, as if we were in some demented French farce."

"Mr. Quayne, kindly be telling me, if you are even able, exactly what was occurring? Facts only."

Across the poet's chalky face there came for an instant a flush of pinkness, whether of shame or anger it was impossible to tell.

"Very well," he said in a rather more businesslike manner. "It was like this. After we Three Wise Men from the West had given our reading at the British Council there was a reception for us at Professor Goswami's house. Little spicy bits brought round by a

creepy-looking servant and nothing at all to drink. If you don't count orange juice."

Ghote once more felt an urge to defend Indian hospitality, even offered by a creepy servant, if creepy the man really was. But, before he could find the right words, with a shudder of distaste the British poet went back to his account.

"And then each one of us was given, or we had thrust into our hands, more like, by someone called Mrs. Namita Rai, a copy of her poetical works, entitled—would you believe—*In the Footsteps of Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Well, naturally, none of us wanted to lug something like that all round the rest of India. So, as it turned out, we each of us contrived discreetly to leave our copies in various parts of the hotel we had been put up at, the Imperial. I hid mine in an inconspicuous corner of what they call the Business Centre, where I was sending off some faxes. Arnold Brudge stuffed his down the side of one of those big sofas in the foyer, and that idiot Raymond left his in the tiny hotel bookshop. In imitation, he said, kept on saying, of that Edgar Allan Poe story, 'The Purloined Letter.'"

"I am well-knowing that tale," Ghote put in, keeping his literary end up.

"Well, everybody knows it. But the thing was—and this is just about as stupid as you can get—the bloody books had been dedicated to each of us by name. So in less than an hour they were all three brought back to our rooms by a bowing and scraping, tip-seeking hotel servant."

Ghote saw the joke. And kept a straight face.

"But why are you telling all this?" he asked. "Kindly stick one hundred percent to point in hand."

The foremost poet of the Electronic Age drew in a sharp sigh.

"This is the point," he snapped. "The bloody ridiculous point of it all. You see, we were invited to Professor Goswami's again next day. Plunging out into the bloody cold smog just to drink a cup of milky damn tea and look at this Eliot poem that had somehow found its way to India and been totally forgotten ever since."

"That is Mr. T. F. Eliot, expired?"

"Expired?" The poet gave a cold giggle. "Yes, I suppose you could say that. Now we've entered the Electronic Age, Eliot and all his stuff has pretty well expired."

"So what was happening, please, at this second visit to late Professor Goswami?"



But it was from Arnold Brudge and not Electronic Age Brian Quayne that Ghote eventually heard his most coherent account of how a copy of Mrs. Namita Rai's poetical works had led to the arrest on suspicion of murder of his erstwhile friend Henry Reymond.

"Henry Reymond," said the massive man opposite, wide chest stretching a rough wool, high-collared, tree-brown pullover to bursting point, two slabs of raw red hands flat on the table in front of him, "that fat slob, he'd faint dead away if he so much as saw a hawk swoop to its kill. He'd piss himself if he heard a dog-fox scream in lust. He'd puke at the smell of a decent bit of blood."

"Yes, yes," Ghote had answered sharply, feeling he ought at least to defend a little his friend of long ago. "But, please, I was asking what was happening when you, all three, were going to Professor Goswami's to examine this poem they are saying is so valuable."

"Oh, that. Well, you see, according to bloody Henry Reymond he had taken with him his copy of *In the Footsteps of Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley*. He says he wanted to hide it in the room where that wretched woman made him accept it. But, because apparently I'd told him to for God's sake shut up about his stupid Edgar Allan Poe, he never said a word to either of us about his sneaky little plan. Then, after Goswami was murdered that night—probably some intruder, I don't know—the police found the bloody book in the room. It was conspicuous enough, for God's sake, hand-bound in fancy red silk. But now Goswami's servant swears it wasn't there before the murder. Dare say the fellow could be right, the way he was going about all the time with a cloth over his shoulder looking for something to dust."

The mountainous poet gave a snort of contempt. Ghote felt puzzled.

"But you, Mr. Brudge," he asked, "were you seeing Mr. Reymond leave that book there? Can you provide confirmation itself?"

His question was answered with a single long, muffled roar. Only on the end of it were words.

"... bother with anything bar Nature. Not what a great slob like Reymond might be doing."

Ghote's hopes sank away. The poet of the Electronic Age had been just as unhelpful over this point. And it was a vital one. If no one who knew Mr. Henry Reymond had seen him hide that silk-bound volume among Professor Goswami's crammed bookshelves, then the chances of persuading the Delhi police that his old acquaintance was not a murderer were slim almost to vanishing point.

"So," he asked desperately, "you cannot be stating definitely whether or not this book by Mrs. Rai was in Professor Goswami's room prior to the event of murder?"

"Said I can't, didn't I?"

It felt like being crushed by a wall of ice.

"Thank you, Mr. Brudge." He roused himself. "And may I say I am hoping one day I would read some of your very-very nice poetry."

"Not *nice*. Christ's sake."

Ghote retreated.

Perhaps Mr. Henry Raymond himself would, asked the right questions in the right way, be able to produce some proof he had not returned to Professor Goswami's in the dead of night in order to steal this newfound valuable poem. Then it would be clear he had not been disturbed by the professor, had not let fall the works of Mrs. Rai, and had not then, as the Delhiwallahs believed, struck the professor down.

But now all the poet of the once-upon-a-time Raj could do, ask him what he would, was to bleat out that he had never left his hotel room that night, and that he had, he had, he had put Mrs. Rai's book onto a shelf in Professor Goswami's room during his afternoon visit.

"Inspector, I know I did. I know it."

"But, please, was anyone seeing?"

For one quiet moment the crime writer/poet sat and thought. But it was for one moment only. Then panic and hysteria set in again.

"No one saw me. No one. Oh God, I wish they had. Then I'd be believed. But—But, you see, that servant seemed to be everywhere I was, when I was about to get rid of that awful book. So in the end I just turned my back and stuffed it into the first place I saw."

"But where was that itself?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't know. Somewhere. Anywhere. All I know is, Professor Goswami was alive and well when I left. I told him how deeply I admired the Eliot manuscript, and then I made that farewell gesture of putting your hands together—one has to make an effort to show you don't feel superior—and we all three got a taxi back to the hotel."

"That was the newly found poem of late Mr. T. F. Eliot?" Ghote asked, hoping for some last tiny corroborative detail.

Henry Raymond gave him a chill look.

"T. S., Inspector," he said. "Tom Eliot's initials were T. S."

The icy hiss with which that final letter was pronounced finished it for Ghote. He found he was almost hoping Henry Reymond, despite the assurances of his two fellow poets, had been capable of murder and had attacked Professor Goswami. But he could not quite believe it.

So he went, not without internal trembling that owed nothing to the freezing smog, to see Delhi's Head of Crime Branch, a yet more formidable figure than his own Assistant Commissioner Pradhan.

But before he had so much as uttered a single word of his report, he saw, prominently lying on the huge desk in front of him, what could be nothing else than the fatal copy of *In the Footsteps of Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley*, beautifully hand-bound in glowing red silk. He felt it was an omen. Of ill-success.

The first words he heard confirmed all his worst fears.

"Well, Inspector? My detectives have got it all wrong, is it? A Bombaywallah is going to put us right?"

"No, sir. That is—Sir, please to believe this. The two poets accompanying Mr. Henry Reymond, who are knowing him well, sir, both are one hundred percent certain he is a man not able to commit any murder."

"And you, Inspector, are you going to tell me there is one single human being in this world incapable, given the right circumstances, of committing an offence under Section 302, Indian Penal Code?"

"No, sir, no. I am not saying such. I would never say anyone is not at worst capable of murder. But, sir, all the same, I also am believing Mr. Henry Reymond would commit such only under tip-top provocation."

"And you think the prospect of getting his dirty thieving hands on this priceless poetical manuscript, now missing, is not provocation enough? Poets are always poor, Inspector. Always needing money for wine, women, song. Even you must be knowing that."

"Sir, yes, that I am understanding. But, sir, kindly consider this. Mr. Henry Reymond is not just only poet. He is crime writer-cum-poet, sir. He is one very-very famous writer of detective stories. Mr. Peduncle series, sir. And, sir, he was telling me. From those books he was making so much money that, sir, he was able to take leave from that work and write one poem in verse, murder story in times of Raj only. So, sir, he is having no need whatsoever of stealing any manuscript."

"No, Inspector. No. Damn it, there is evidence. This book. Found at the murder scene itself. First-class evidence."

A ferocious hand slapped down on the red silk.

Ghote, as soon as the hand was lifted, ventured to pick the book up. Perhaps Mr. Henry Reymond's name was not actually in it? Perhaps one of the other poets' was?

But no. There on the title page was the inscription: *To my fellow poet Mr. Henry Reymond. In admiration. Namita Rai.*

Why had the fellow not paid attention to the book being returned to him at the Imperial Hotel just only because of that inscription? Why had he not had the simple sense to tear out that page? Probably because he had believed in his coldly high-and-mighty way that no one would ever find the book among all the others in Professor Goswami's room. But he had failed to reckon with the efficiency of the police searchers. Even the Delhi searchers.

He flipped over the page and read the titles of the first few poems.

Ode to the East Wind

To a Seven-Sisters Bird

Triumph of Death (Cancelled Opening)

"Leave that alone, Inspector."

Ghote hastily replaced the red-silk volume.

"And listen to me. Unless you have something better to tell me than all that nonsense about poets not needing money and this friend of yours not being capable of murder, I am going to charge-sheet him. Now."

"Sir, no. Sir, kindly give me some more time. I will talk to him again. Find if he has some alibi."

"Alibi? Oh, yes, and what alibi did he produce for us? Asleep in his room at the Imperial Hotel. And not even a woman beside him. What sort of a poet is that?"

"Sir, one altogether timid."

"Eh? Timid? Timid, did you say? Well, I suppose you've got a point there, Inspector. Point of sorts. All right, I tell you what. I'll give you till ten P.M. tonight. Come back to me then with some sort of decent evidence and I'll give the matter more consideration. All right?"

"Yes, sir. Yes."

Ghote left. Hurriedly.

But go over and over the circumstances with Henry Reymond though he might, he could not extract from the crime writer-cum-poet one single fact that might prove he had not sneaked out of

the Imperial Hotel, gone slipping through the chill, blanketing smog of Delhi's nighttime streets to Professor Goswami's and, while seizing this poem by Mr. T. F.—no, T. S.—Eliot, been disturbed by the professor and in a struggle killed him.

So it was well before his deadline hour that, sadly, he left the prisoner to his fate.

He wandered out into the bone-chilling night, still convinced, nevertheless, that Henry Raymond had never murdered Professor Goswami. That red-silk-covered book *In the Footsteps of Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley*, what trouble it had caused. All because, in the warmth of fellow feeling for those visiting British poets, Namita Rai had made them the gift of those copies.

And how sad it was that the three of them, with cold-hearted Britishness, had tried to get rid of the books. Poor Mrs. Rai. If she ever got to know. And—then the thought struck him—she *would* get to know. When the papers described every detail of the trial for murder of a famous U.K. poet, it would come out that he, and his fellow poets, had all tried to dispose of Mrs. Namita Rai's works.

No, he must tell her about it himself. He must tell her now. Break it to her gently. So that she would have not too much of suffering.

He hurried over to Police Headquarters, consulted a telephone directory, found that Mrs. Rai's residence was not far away.

A quarter of an hour later he was closeted with the writer of *Ode to the East Wind* and *Triumph of Death (Cancelled Opening)*.

And five minutes after that he was sitting in a glow of delight. He had obtained perfect proof that Mr. Henry Raymond had left his copy of Mrs. Rai's book at Professor Goswami's while that learned gentleman was still hale and hearty. Proof Mr. Henry Raymond had never taken that handwritten poem of Mr. T. S.—Yes, T. S.—Eliot so as to sell it for the huge sum it would fetch. No doubt the professor's servant—Mr. Brian Quayne was right after all, the fellow must be "creepy"—had led some dacoit friends to this much vaunted valuable object and so brought about the professor's death.

"But, Inspector," Mrs. Rai had said, "I am well knowing what those disgraceful Englishmen were doing. Goswami Sahib himself was finding Mr. Raymond's copy of my book pushed in among his shelves, and he was being so kind as to tell me what had happened in case I should hear of it from some less well-wishing friend."●



THE THIRTEENTH DANCER

by Neil Jillett

He slid the carving set, in its velvet-lined, fake-walnut box, from the top drawer of the sideboard in the dining room.

"What are you up to, rattling around in there?" his mother demanded from the kitchen.

"Just looking for some string," he shouted back. The sideboard drawers were a repository for all sorts of odds and ends, from rubber bands and exhausted ballpoints to old postage stamps that his mother fancied might turn out to be valuable one day. "A strap on my backpack's busted." That was true, and he'd better fix it after he had checked on the knife.

The carving set, knife, fork, and sharpening-steel, all bone-handled and marked *Made in Sheffield*, had been among the few wedding presents his parents had been given. Twenty-eight years later, it was the only one left. Everything else had worn out or been broken or lost. The carving set had not been used since his

father had run out on him and his mother and sister fifteen years ago. The dinner service his mother had bought early in the marriage had also been kept out of service. It was turquoise, decorated with a border of red, orange, and blue flowers and a band of gold, as fake as the carving set's "walnut" box. She insisted it had become an heirloom, to be treasured and passed on to him when he married and started a family.

Every three months or so, on one of her special cleaning days, his mother would check that the unused china had not

in some mysterious way been chipped or cracked. She would also take out the carving-set box and give it a polish with her duster. "I like to keep some things for best," she would say, replacing the box in the drawer. But *best*, whatever that was—having visitors and not eating in the kitchen, he supposed—never came.

He ran his thumb along the knife's edge. Not all that sharp, but the point, when he removed the cork that his mother kept on it ("You can never be too careful when it comes to knives"), looked dangerous enough, and that was what counted.

He'd need the knife only if killing turned out to be unavoidable. He didn't really believe things would come to that, although the stirring in his gut told him he was already hoping they would. So it would be just as well to have a good knife. It seemed to him the only weapon an amateur—well, semi-amateur—could safely use. He supposed he could buy a knife in Adelaide, but what if the shops were closed when he needed to get one in a hurry? To be on the safe side, he'd arm himself in advance. His mother had done one of her big cleanups the other day. It wasn't likely she'd miss the knife.

He stuck the cork back on the point and shoved the knife into the bottom of his backpack, under the spare socks and underpants

Australian Neil Jillett is well qualified to write about the dance world, for he was once the dance critic for a Melbourne newspaper and currently accepts freelance writing assignments to cover dance companies as far from each other geographically as Adelaide and Seattle. As in his previous work for *EQMM*, Mr. Jillett manages to weave his specialized knowledge into a crackerjack mystery plot. ¶

and the bodytights that he knew he had dyed exactly the right shades—midnight blue and what he thought of as dried blood. With some string he attempted a repair job on the broken strap, but soon gave it up as not worth the trouble.

He walked through the kitchen and out to the drive and tossed the pack onto the backseat of the 1972 Holden sedan. It was a real hoon's car to look at, ready for the junkyard, most people would reckon; but the engine was in good enough nick, and he was allowing himself plenty of time to do the 1600-mile drive, halfway across the country, from Brisbane to Adelaide. He'd have been in a rush if he'd wanted to be there for opening night, but he'd decided against that. He couldn't risk running into Mike Gillmore, who, he'd heard on a radio program about the festival, would be in Adelaide for a few days.

Back in the kitchen, he thought how old and tired his mother looked in her faded floral apron and scruffy pink "silk" slippers; with a hairnet imprisoning an unsuccessful do-it-yourself perm; sixty at least, if you were asked to make a guess, though she still had a couple of years to go before she was fifty.

He felt only a flicker of guilt about going away again so soon. He might have found it harder to leave if her grizzling didn't get him down so much. Sometimes he wanted to punch the old girl, to shut her up. It wasn't like he was leaving her on her own. His sister and Bruce, the guy she was living with, would call in fairly regularly to check she was okay, and that money she'd scored in her auntie's will a few years back meant she was never short of a dollar.

He couldn't wait to be out of the place. And it wasn't just that he'd be glad to go; he had to go.

"If I look like being away more than a couple of weeks, Mum," he said, making an effort to rustle up a grin, "I'll give you a call."

"Give me a call anyway." She could never pick when he was kidding her.

"Okay, if I'm near a phone."

"Make it your business to be near one," she snapped. Then her face softened for a moment. She went into her bedroom and took fifty dollars from the purse she kept on a shelf in the wardrobe. She returned to the kitchen and pushed the money into the pocket of his denim shirt, next to the packet of Marlboros. She pursed her lips at this evidence that he hadn't kicked the habit she was always on about.

"Thanks, Mum." He kissed her cheek. "Well, gotta be off."

"I wish you'd try and get a job."

"You know I'm trying for the only job I want."

"Oh, that."

"Yeah. *Oh, that's* what this trip's all about."

"You've hardly been back two months; after wasting all that time gallivanting round Germany and those other places."

"Don't start, Mum." He couldn't keep the heat from his voice, though he tried to, out of gratitude for the unexpected fifty dollars. "Be seeing you."

She looked as if she was thinking about saying something else, perhaps have another go about his smoking; but he wasn't going to hang round while she made up her mind. He gave a quick wave and avoided looking at her again as he backed the rattling Holden down the drive.

They were all masked, but to Bronwyn Baker they would never be anonymous. She could recognize each of them by their bodies. They were not perfect bodies, just nearly perfect, and their individuality was vital to the harmony of contrasts she encouraged in their dancing.

Danny Harkness, for instance, had slightly bowed legs. He made no attempt to hide his "deformity," and this refusal to be embarrassed by it gave his dancing a cheeky arrogance that was its most attractive quality.

Bridget James's broad shoulders and boldly muscled thighs and calves meant that she could never be a classically ethereal ballerina. Those legs propelled her into jumps of a height to challenge a man's. Yet there was nothing masculine about Bridget's style. She had the confidence of a strong, beautiful woman who took pride in what her body could do, and when she and Danny danced together, her strength and his arrogance combined, sexually and aesthetically, in a way that always excited the audience.

They had such similar, distinctive good looks—wide foreheads, voluptuously defined mouths, slanting green eyes above high cheekbones, orientally black and glossy hair, his tied back in a ponytail, hers coiled at the nape of her neck—that they were often mistaken for twins.

Now, their resemblance diminished by the uniformity imposed on the group by the masks, Danny and Bridget were dancing

together, as excitingly as ever, but that was not why Bronwyn was holding her breath as she glared at the stage.

Well, at least, she thought, trying to comfort herself, it's not opening night; no critics here, none of those nitpickers who'd rather find fault with everything than enjoy the dancing. She turned cold with the thought of how Michael Gillmore, the choreographer of *Six of One*, would have reacted to what was happening onstage. Thank God he'd had to go back to Germany after only a few days in Adelaide.

She nudged Robert Elston, who was sitting beside her in the seventh row of the front stalls in the Festival Theatre. "There's thirteen up there," she whispered.

"This piece goes so fast," he whispered back, "I wasn't sure whether my eyes were playing tricks."

Bronwyn half rose from her seat, and the level of her voice rose with her. "I've got to get backstage."

As Robert gripped Bronwyn's forearm, forcing her back into her seat, a woman behind them leaned forward and murmured, "Please keep quiet."

For the next few minutes Bronwyn managed to stay silent; but then, as the thirteenth dancer began a solo that counterpointed rather than distracted attention from the rest of the performance, she muttered, "Where the hell did he come from? What's he up to?"

"Really!" The murmur behind them had become a hiss. "Some people."

Robert tightened his grip on Bronwyn's arm and put his mouth to her ear, grateful for a surge in the music that made it impossible for anyone else to hear him. "There's nothing you can do now. You'll have to wait till it's over. Just be grateful he's such a good dancer."

"Good? He's brilliant." Bronwyn groaned as the music dropped several decibels. "But I'll still kill the bastard when I get my hands on him."

"Shut up!" The woman's demand was loud enough to make heads turn throughout the stalls.

Robert's grip on Bronwyn's arm was now so tight that he was worried he might inflict some injury. She patted the restraining hand and gave him a nervous, apologetic smile—a promise that she would keep quiet—and for the remaining twenty-five minutes of *Six of One* she did not say a word. But she could not enjoy what

she was watching, even though the intruder made it one of the most extraordinary pieces of theatre she had ever seen, and certainly the finest performance by the Australian Contemporary Dance Ensemble (ACDE) since she had formed it six years ago. There was no way she could relish the irony that her ensemble was literally living up to the nickname, Baker's Dozen, by which it was known throughout Australia. In the world of the performing arts ridicule could kill reputations, often with a cruelly debilitating slowness, and she feared that ridicule, not admiration, would greet this performance by thirteen dancers of an internationally celebrated masterpiece that had been choreographed for only twelve.

But there was no ridicule that night, only wave after wave of astonished applause. The twelve dancers of the ACDE, their individuality subdued though not obliterated by silver masks and blue-and-red tights, took ten curtain calls, and the thirteenth dancer took the first two with them. The dancers were wobbly-kneed from their exertions and their triumph, reeling from it, too pumped up with adrenalin even to consider what they should do about the stranger.

When, within a few seconds of the opening bars of the recorded music, he had bounded onto the stage, the other dancers had immediately realized there was no sense in trying to get rid of him. He was never in their way, never at odds with the choreography or the music; a wild mixture of eighteenth-century classics and 1960s rock. It was as if every step he took, every broad or subtle movement of his body, had been plotted for him by Michael Gillmore as part of *Six of One*. To hustle him offstage would disrupt, or even destroy, the work as he was elegantly reshaping it. And when the others saw that he was at least as good a dancer as they were (later, they had to admit among themselves that he was much better), their initial apprehension and anger were replaced by a delight at his unfalteringly inventive skill.

It was at this point that he became their leader as well as their colleague. It was not as if he was trying to outshine them; he made them shine more brightly. He did not force them into changes, but, after a few minutes, when they had become accustomed to his presence, he did encourage them into slight variations, into the most slyly evolving nuances, that placed him at the heart of *Six of One*. The other dancers responded with an exhilaration, a bemused recklessness, that was close to ecstasy.

Once the thirteenth dancer had captured them, it did not occur to them to try to break free. And even if Bronwyn had been backstage there was no way, short of bringing down the curtain or pulling the plug on the recorded music, that she could have stopped the performance.

Two or four dancers regularly left the stage, regained their breath, then returned to keep the collective energy going. These exits and re-entries, unobtrusively placed, kept the piece hovering on the brink of a tremendous climax of movement. But the stranger remained onstage throughout the performance. He never seemed to relax his efforts, although Bronwyn Baker noted, with bitter admiration, the cunning with which he paced himself so that he rarely appeared to be dancing at less than full throttle.

While the applause was still pounding in from the stalls and circle, Bronwyn and Robert Elston, who was the ACDE's manager, hurried backstage.

"Where is he?" she shouted. "Where's that bastard got to?"

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Danny Harkness said, "He seems to have shot through."

Danny had untied his ponytail, and Bridget had uncoiled her bun. Their faces were framed by shoulder-length hair in a way that heightened their extraordinary resemblance. It seemed to Bronwyn that they were playacting, making an ill-timed game of how much they looked alike. She could have knocked those beautiful heads together.

"That's a very helpful observation, Danny, I'm sure," she sneered. "Thank God Mike Gillmore wasn't here to see the fiasco."

"What fiasco, Bron?" Bridget asked. She waved her arm towards the auditorium. The applause had stopped, but there was still an excited buzz from the other side of the curtain. "Listen to that."

The thirteenth dancer might not have escaped so easily, might not have escaped at all, if the ACDE had been a bigger company. It operated tightly on a small budget, without a stage manager, and relied on temporary stagehands to ensure that things ran smoothly.

The stagehands that night were not dance fans. Without props to handle or scenery to shift, they spent most of the time playing cards, their backs to the performance. They had no idea that, at

least in Bronwyn's estimation, an emergency had erupted. No one had told them to keep count of the dancers.

The thirteenth dancer had assumed that security on the stage door would be tight, but it was far more lax than he had experienced in any of the European theatres where he had danced. No one questioned him as he explored backstage. No one interrupted him when, having found an empty dressing room, he prepared for his performance.

He pulled off the shaggy, dirty-blond wig and matching moustache and slid out of the workman's overalls he had worn over his tights. His mask—no time-consuming fuss getting makeup right—and dancing shoes were in an electrician's toolbox. The knife was there, too, just in case. He could not imagine any circumstances that would force him to use it that night, but the thought that he might need it eventually was much stronger than it had been when he'd opened the sideboard drawer in Brisbane.

Thirty-five minutes later the wig, moustache, and overalls were back on. The doorkeeper did not even look up as the thirteenth dancer walked out into the night.

In his motel room he had two quick cigarettes, lighting one from the butt of the other and dragging hard at the smoke. He was surprised to find himself so hungry for the taste. He despised smoking. Usually, it was only the edginess of being near his mother that drove him back to the habit. His mother . . . He rang his mother. She took a long time to answer.

"I think I've got that job, Mum."

"What job?"

"With a dance company here in Adelaide."

"Oh." The syllable suggested boredom, if it suggested anything.

"I've just had an audition, sort of."

"Funny time for an audition."

"Glad you're so pleased for me, Mum."

"I am, Son." She was trying now, he had to admit, to put some enthusiasm into her voice. "It's just that . . ."

"I know, Mum. You were hoping I'd got a real job."

"I really am pleased for you, Son. It's just that I should be getting back to bed. I've had my tablets." A pause, then she repeated, "I really am pleased for you, Son. And perhaps getting the job will encourage you to lay off the—"

"Perhaps it will, Mum." That's the least of your worries about

me, old girl, he mouthed silently. He lit another Marlboro and puffed smoke into the receiver as he hung up. "Sleep tight, Mum."

As he ran the night's performance through his mind, he shuddered with the conflicting tensions he always felt after he'd fooled people, shoved himself right into the middle of things, especially in a place he'd never been to before. His mind bounced brutally between clarity and confusion: decisive one moment, muddled as all hell the next.

He took the knife from the toolbox in which he had carried it to the theatre and put it under his pillow. He was not sure why he did this—and before he lay down he returned the knife to the box. The way things had gone tonight, it was unlikely he'd need it, although it was a worry about Danny Harkness. He hadn't known Danny was in the ACDE, and though he'd picked him straight off—those bandy legs were a dead giveaway—he was pretty sure Danny hadn't recognized him. So it should be all right, especially as Danny didn't know his real name or where he came from.

That thought made him wonder where Danny lived. He consulted the phone book on the bedside table. There was a Harkness, Daniel Tomas listed at a place in the suburb of Glenelg. He remembered how Danny used to make a performance of having an ordinary middle name spelt an extraordinary way ("Well, it's extraordinary if you're not Hungarian, and I'm not"). He might call Danny later. Maybe, maybe not. He always woke up a couple of times during the night—his overactive brain, he supposed.

His imagination was going full blast. He climbed out of bed and put the knife back under the pillow. You can't count on things not coming unstuck just because they couldn't look better. . . . It felt like insurance having the knife near him, ready for use. As he closed his eyes, he imagined a redness sliding along the blade. The image was so vivid he almost turned the pillow over to see if it was stained with blood.

When they had showered and were back in their street clothes, Bronwyn gathered the dancers around her.

"Sorry about blowing my top before," she said. "You all coped marvelously." She took a deep breath. "Let's take this slowly. See if we can make some sort of sense of what happened. Did anyone recognize him?"

Danny Harkness opened his mouth, then shut it. He coughed and said, "He was wearing a mask, just like ours."

Bronwyn had the impression he had been about to say something else. "I was hoping one of you might have known him, spotted something about his physique or style that rang a bell."

When the dancers shook their heads, she said quietly, as if afraid of eavesdroppers, "Please, not a word about this to anyone. God only knows what Mike Gillmore would do if he heard."

"Surely he'd be pleased?" Bridget James said. "It seemed exactly what Mike Gillmore would have done if he'd used thirteen dancers."

"The point is," Bronwyn irritably reminded her, "Mike choreographed it for twelve, because that's the way he . . ."

The sentence trailed off as she realized that, having begun to recover from the brain-freezing effect of the night's performance, she knew who the thirteenth dancer was, although she did not know his name or where he came from or where she might find him.

The acclaim the ACDE received when it danced *Six of One*—the last item of a triple bill—on the opening night of the Adelaide Festival had enhanced the sense of amazed gratitude Bronwyn Baker felt at acquiring the work so easily.

When she had gone to Munich a year ago, she had hardly dared to hope that she would return to Adelaide with Mike Gillmore's permission for the ACDE to dance his internationally acclaimed masterpiece, the first work he had devised when he became artistic director of the Munich Dance Theatre. He allowed her to have *Six of One* because it would be the centerpiece of the ACDE's program at the Adelaide Festival. Leading ensembles and soloists representing all the performing arts from around the world would be at the festival, along with an international clutch of influential critics; and, for all the fame he had achieved, Mike Gillmore was always happy to garner a new clutch of reviews for his scrapbook.

"I've always liked Australian dancers," he told Bronwyn in Munich. "They stretch themselves right past what you think they're capable of. We get them through here regularly, though they don't stay all that long. . . ."

"They probably get extra homesick, being so much further from home than everyone else," Bronwyn said. "It's easy to mistake that for unreliability."

"Not much for me to complain about on that score," Gillmore said. "Though we did have one Aussie oddball through only a few

months back. I could never decide whether he was a card-carrying crazy or just a weirdo."

"That's not much of a choice," Bronwyn said lightly. She was concerned that Gillmore's recollection of how one of her countrymen had behaved could be a problem in her negotiations for *Six of One*.

"I haven't the vaguest what his real name was." Gillmore frowned and smiled at the memory. "He was a great dancer, no denying that. But he had this trouble sticking to the choreography, though he was always saying how much he admired my stuff. After a few performances he'd start changing pieces as he went along. Probably had quite a choreographic gift, something to be encouraged. But not when he's dancing in my work!"

Still worried that whatever this crazy Australian had done might dissuade Gillmore from giving her *Six of One*, Bronwyn asked, "Did he cause any other trouble?"

"Hard to put a finger on it. Something about him—a hint of barely repressed violence, perhaps—upset the other dancers. They couldn't praise his dancing enough, but he was an unsettling influence."

Gillmore's tone suggested that he did not want to continue criticizing one Australian to another. "Anyway, he left us after a few months. I heard he—or some other Aussie like him—turned up in Frankfurt and Stuttgart and got himself into companies, and into some sort of trouble. There were some stories on the grapevine from Switzerland as well."

A few hours after the thirteenth dancer's unscheduled debut with the ACDE, Bridget James said to Danny Harkness as they lay in bed, "You were thinking about something else, weren't you?"

"Sorry."

She slid her fingers gently along his sweat-filmed chest. "Nothing to apologize for. Not great, but it'll do to be going on with."

"I said I was sorry."

"I wasn't complaining, Danny; just making a comment. You didn't have your mind on the job."

"The job! Pardon me if—"

"Stop dodging what's really on your mind." When Danny said nothing she added, "You know who he is, don't you?"

There was a long pause before Danny said, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

"Because he's crazy."

"We all are, to be in this business. A life of pain and five minutes of fame, if we're lucky. But he's a great dancer."

"Better than us, and we're bloody good."

"So why not talk about him?"

Danny put an arm around Bridget's shoulders, and for a few moments she thought he was not going to say anything more. Then he gave a nervous laugh, an embarrassed giggle. "To tell the truth, even thinking about him makes me nervous." Danny was silent again, but Bridget sensed he would say more if she let him take his time.

"He was in the National Ballet School during my last year," he said at last. "That was in ninety-one, the year before I came to Adelaide to join the ACDE. He was a late entrant. He said he was eighteen, a year older than me, but I reckon he was into his twenties. He boasted the way little kids do, but all the same there was something sort of very adult about him. He was always talking about forming his own company, or taking one over. 'Whatever's necessary,' he'd say. He was going to be director, principal dancer, and choreographer."

"Well, he can certainly dance, and he seems to have something as a choreographer."

"He just turned up at the school in Melbourne and somehow wangled a special audition. Brilliant, as you'd expect, but he didn't last long."

Bridget felt that Danny had said enough to respond to some gentle prompting. "What happened?"

"There were stories he was flogging drugs to other students, the juniors, and making some pretty heavy threats when they got behind with their payments."

"Nasty."

"A couple of students were hauled out of the school by their parents, quick smart," Danny said. "It looked like there was going to be a bloody great scandal, but somehow it was hushed up."

"And Twinkle Toes?"

"He disappeared. I suppose he got the shove, but maybe he just went."

"Where did he come from?"

"Who knows? He called himself Mikhail Oblonski, would you believe! Or something like that. Whatever, he'd have to have

made it up. Quite a few of the kids at the school gave themselves stage names. They wouldn't answer to anything else." Danny frowned. "Why's he come to Adelaide?"

"To dance in *Six of One*, obviously."

"Yeah. But I wonder if he's got anything else in mind."

By ten o'clock on the morning after the thirteenth dancer's "audition" there had been more than twenty calls to the ACDE's office, all congratulating Bronwyn Baker and her ensemble on the performance of *Six of One*, although no one appeared to have spotted the extra dancer onstage.

Bronwyn responded politely to the congratulations, but they only made it more difficult for her to stop worrying about the thirteenth dancer; about the possibility that he might appear again, about the ridicule if the word got out that the ACDE's finest performance had occurred because of something beyond her control. She decided to escape into work. "Keep all calls away from me, Bev, if you value my sanity," she told her office manager.

At ten-thirty, when a caller demanded to speak to Bronwyn Baker, Bev said, "I'm afraid you can't; she's taking class."

"It's very important and very personal." The caller refused to state his name ("It wouldn't mean anything to her") or business, but his tone persuaded Bev that she should interrupt the class.

When the call was transferred, he told Bronwyn, without preliminary, "I was hoping to join your company."

"As what?"

"As a dancer, of course."

"I'm afraid there are no vacancies." Right around the country, there were far more dancers than places for them in companies. Bronwyn, instinctively sympathetic to anyone in search of a job, tried to soften rejection by explaining, "I never have more than twelve dancers. It's exactly the right number for our sort of choreography."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

Still wrung out, mentally and physically, by the previous night's drama, Bronwyn did not pick up the innuendo in the caller's voice. "And on our budget," she said, "we couldn't afford even one more than twelve, even if I wasn't superstitious. So I'm afraid there's not even any point in giving you an audition."

"Well, in my case, an audition's hardly necessary."

There was now an unmistakable edge of sarcasm to the voice at

the other end of the line, and Bronwyn knew who the caller was when he demanded, "What *more* do I have to do to persuade you to hire me?"

Flustered, not sure how she should respond to such a question from a man she knew must be mad, Bronwyn could think of no reply except, "Hope for a vacancy, I suppose."

"You said it, not me."

There was a click at the other end. Bronwyn, trembling, held on to the receiver for a few moments before hanging up.

A café in Hindley Street gave a clear view of the door of the ACDE's office and rehearsal rooms. The thirteenth dancer, back in his overalls and wig and moustache, sat there drinking coffee, smoking, and pretending to read a paperback, *Great Dancers of the Twentieth Century*. He was prepared to be patient — now, as he waited for Danny to appear, then later, when . . . *First get into the company, then work out how to take it over.*

At five-thirty Danny Harkness and Bridget James and other dancers came out onto the street.

"I suppose you really have to go?" Bridget said, knowing it was mean of her to try to persuade him out of it.

"He's the only relative I've got in Adelaide, and it's his birthday."

"When you come from a small family like mine," Bridget said, "it takes getting used to someone with aunts and uncles all over the place."

"You wouldn't want too many uncles like my Uncle Gareth. But if you fancy a taste of what it's like, don't forget you were invited."

"I really don't enjoy boozy parties."

"It'll certainly be that, the old bugger turning sixty."

"And it's not as if I've met him." Bridget sighed. "I'm not trying to be a misery-guts. But it's only a month since I moved in with you. I feel like I'm still on the honeymoon."

"Me too," Danny said, pressing against her.

"You'd better get going." Bridget kissed him, hard. "Before someone comes along with a bucket of cold water."

"I shouldn't be too late," Danny said over his shoulder, and winked.

Watching them from the café as they set off in opposite directions along Hindley Street, the thirteenth dancer said under his breath, "You had me worried there for a minute, Danny boy. I

thought she wasn't going to stop at kissing you. Whatever that little tiff was about, you still should have invited her home to bed. She was really asking for it. But you can still do the right thing by *me*. Make sure you're safely tucked up and sound asleep by midnight. I want it neat and tidy. No mess."

He's a bit girlish, but still a good-looking guy, the thirteenth dancer thought, as Danny, long hair swinging in time with his stride, disappeared around a corner, presumably heading for the tram that would take him to his flat in Glenelg.

The thirteenth dancer imagined dark hair spread out, like a shadow, against sheets . . . features in profile softened, made more feminine, by moonlight through curtains . . . a smoothly muscled back exposed.

There was nothing about it in the newspaper that came with the breakfast delivered to his motel room. Too soon for there to be anything on the radio, either. He wondered—it was a crazy idea, he knew, but, all the same, it would be great if it worked out that way—he wondered if he could time his arrival at the ACDE's office to coincide with some broadcast announcement by the cops . . .

Two hours later, rattling towards Hindley Street in the Holden, he turned on the radio for a last check for any news.

There were good cooking smells, unusual in his mother's house, when he walked through the back door into the kitchen.

"Special occasion?" he asked. "Celebrating your favorite son's return." He gave his mother a quick kiss. Against his forehead, her new perm felt cold and slimy.

"I might have done, if you'd let me know you were coming home."

"Sorry about that, Mum. Every time I found a phone I didn't have change."

"So you say." She looked up from chopping mint to go with the roast lamb. "I thought you were staying in Adelaide. That business you rang about, the audition and getting a job."

"Things didn't quite work out the way I thought they would; not quite like I planned."

"Oh, yes." If she was interested, her voice gave no hint. "When you've had a wash-up you can set the table. I was just getting around to it."

"So what is the big occasion?"

"Gloria and Bruce are announcing their engagement. Just a small family celebration. His parents are coming over."

"So he's got her pregnant at last?"

"You've always had a dirty mind," said his mother, maintaining the pretence that her daughter was still "just friendly" with the man she had been living with for three years.

"And you'll make a lovely grandma." He was rather proud of himself, full of jokes when he had so much on his mind, though he was pretty sure no one had seen him at Glenelg. "Well," he said, "like you told me, I'd better go and wash up."

A few minutes later, as the thirteenth dancer set the table in the dining room, his mother called from the kitchen, "Make sure you get out the good china, those nice floral plates and things I like to keep for best."

"Okay, Mum."

"The carving set, too—it's in the top drawer. You're the man of the house, Son, so put yourself at the head of the table. When there's a roast and visitors, it's nice if the man of the house carves at the table. Makes a real occasion of things. Don't forget to sharpen the knife."

"In a minute, Mum," he said, going out to the car to collect his backpack.

"Where are you off to now?"

"Won't be a tick. Just remembered something."

Back in the dining room, he took the knife from the pack as his mother called out again. "You still haven't really told me what happened about that job."

"Not much to tell, Mum."

"What about the audition you had? Wasn't there a vacancy for you, after all? I've told you all along, till I'm blue in the face, there's just too many of you boys wanting to be dancers and not enough jobs to go round. And all that smoking doesn't help, if you want to be in shape."

The thirteenth dancer waited patiently for her to finish. He thought how much he'd like a cigarette, the first since he'd left Adelaide. But she'd only be on at him if he lit up in the house.

"There was a vacancy, Mum," he said, placing the knife beside the carving fork at the head of the table. "But it turned out to be for a girl." ●

EVENTS IN A SNOWSTORM

by Raymond Steiber

It was snowing when Sue Corwin turned out of the parking lot of the Grand Union and she felt her rear wheels break loose. A brief loss of traction—nothing more than that—but she tightened up anyway. Slick roads did that to her now. Slick roads summoned up the image of Ted's Bronco, the front and side smashed in, the windshield gone, the steering wheel a twisted oval.

The snow came down harder. The wiper blades swept back and forth, barely able to keep up. She switched on her headlights, more to be seen than to see. It was going to be a big one, she decided. The first big snow of the winter. She'd always looked forward to the first snow. You threw an extra log in the woodstove. You brewed a cup of herbal tea. You snuggled up on the sofa with a good book, glancing up now and then to watch the progress of the storm. Winter was her quiet time. In the real-estate business you made your money in the spring, summer, and early fall. Then winter came and everything slowed to a crawl and you discovered other pleasures—rather guilty pleasures in this age. Tending the house, trying out new recipes on Ted, loafing. There was a lot to be said for loafing. It was the nifty little secret the housewives of the earlier part of the century had kept from their husbands.

But now—now winter felt different. It felt bleak and lonely, and as she turned into her driveway, the old frame house looked cheerless in the failing light.

Raymond Steiber is as mysterious as his writings. When we asked him for some biographical notes he wrote: "I think ideally the author shouldn't even exist for the reader—the story should just *happen* as if it came out of nowhere." So we cannot tell you anything about him except that he also writes novels. (Interested? Try St. Martin's Press). †

She got the groceries out of the backseat and carried them up to the house. I ought to have a dog, she thought. Something warm and nonjudgmental to greet me when I open the door. But the spaniel had been with Ted that day and shared his fate. A state trooper had found her bloody and whimpering in the snow beside the wreck. And the trooper had put her out of her misery, risking a dressing-down from his superior for drawing and firing his weapon.

She turned on the lights. Lights in the living room, lights in the kitchen. It didn't help much. The basic fact was that she was alone.

She put on the tea kettle, then stood in front of the window while she waited for it to heat. The house wasn't on the lake. It stood on a rise well back from it. But you could see the lake and the mountains beyond, too. Not just now, though. The swirling snow had made them do a disappearing act.

The phone rang, jolting her. It was the office phone, not the one in the living room. She went on through and picked it up without bothering to turn on the lights.

"Hi," a voice said.

"Who is this?" But she already knew who it was. She knew from the reaction in her chest.

"It's Ben. Ben Marciano. I had some business up in Albany and I thought I'd swing by and see you."

She glanced out the window. "It's not the best weather for it, Ben."

"Don't run me off now, I'm halfway there. We could have a meal at that place by the lake—Eddie's. It's not exactly the Four Seasons, but then I've never been in the Four Seasons."

She hadn't seen him since late in the fall. There'd been a snow that day, too, but then the sun had come out again and by late afternoon it was gone.

"Do you think you can make it in that car of yours?"

"It's light. It rides right up over the snow. And it's got frontwheel drive. And what the hell, if I end up in a ditch, I can always walk."

She surprised herself by laughing. "We'd need a blowtorch to thaw you out."

"Just stick me by the fire till a warm puddle forms. So is it all right to stop by?"

She hesitated a moment. She wasn't going to say no, but she was like everybody else, she had to play the game.

"Well, I guess," she said.

And wasn't that well done—just the right amount of disinter-

est. She wondered at her guile. And she hadn't had any practice in years. Maybe it came with the chromosomes.

"I figure six-thirty, seven o'clock," he said.

She thought about Ted. She thought about the fatal slide. "Don't force it, Ben."

"Don't worry. I'm indestructible. Don't you know that?"

She put down the phone. Out in the kitchen the water was boiling briskly. She made her tea. Then she went upstairs and did something that made her blush in spite of her thirty-five years. She changed the sheets on the bed.

It wasn't that the car was in the ditch. It was that it was in the ditch with one door hanging open.

Ben gentled the Probe to a stop on the slick road. Then he set the brake and hit the emergency flasher button. He climbed out from behind the wheel. He had thick black hair and one of those faces women like—a little hard, though, around the eyes and mouth. He lit a cigarette and approached the car in the ditch. It was a blue Toyota four-door and it sat at a ludicrous angle with the right-hand headlight buried in the snowy bank.

They really put it in there, he thought. It'll take a wrecker to get it out.

The door that hung open was on the passenger side. It had only gone partway and then jammed against the bank. There was just enough room for somebody to squeeze out, and he could see footprints there, half filled with new snow. A funny thing about those footprints. They didn't circle back to the road. They tracked straight off into the woods.

Epaulettes of white were forming on the shoulders of his black leather jacket. He took a drag off the cigarette. Filthy habit, but he was too much of a nicotine degenerate to quit.

He circled around the back of the car and slid through the open door. Right away he knew it was a renter, and a recent one at that. There was none of the usual clutter people leave behind when they use a car day in and day out. He opened the glove compartment and found nothing inside but the owner's manual in its plastic sleeve. That made it certain it was a renter.

He'd been holding the cigarette outside the car. Good thing, too, because its absence from the interior allowed him to detect the faint odor of a woman's scent. The tracks outside appeared to be those of a man. So there'd been two people in the car and they'd taken off in different directions.

Funny how when you were trained for it, when it was your profession, you could sense when things were wrong. Abandoned car in a ditch on a snowy night—you saw it all the time. And all it meant was that the driver hadn't been able to handle the conditions. Incompetence or overconfidence—the two abiding traits of the human race. Yet the second his headlights had picked out the Toyota he had known that it was more than that. And now, as his eyes drifted to the upper edge of the windshield, his hunch was verified.

The snow layering the outside of the glass had partially obscured it. That was why he hadn't spotted it the moment he'd slid inside the car. A dime-size hole with a spiderweb of cracks raying away from it.

So there'd been a third person in the car—probably in the back-seat. And he'd had a pistol. And he'd used it at least once.

It was dark out now, coasting toward seven-thirty. She thought: Ben should've been here by now.

She went to the window. It was getting impossible out there, a constant slant of snow. She couldn't even tell where the road was anymore. She tried to remember the last time she'd heard a car go by and couldn't.

He's stuck somewhere, she thought. Let it be that and nothing else. He'll call me, tell me he can't make it—like Ted should've called and hadn't.

It got to be a quarter of eight and still there was no sign of Ben. She kept going to the window. She would've made herself a cup of tea, but she'd had so much already that her kidneys were floating.

She went out into the kitchen anyway. And that was when the back doorknob rattled and there was a soft, tentative knock.

A little thrill went through her—what the French call a *frisson*—and it wasn't very pleasant. She had the feeling that whoever it was had been standing outside the door for some time, trying to figure out whether anyone was at home. Then he'd tried the knob and just at that moment the kitchen light had come on and he'd had to switch to a knock.

Ted had owned a hunting rifle and also a pistol. But after his death it had all been put in a trunk, and the trunk had gone up in the attic. So as far as weapons went, she was naked.

Kitchen knife, she thought. Then she realized how ludicrous it would be to open the door on a neighbor holding it in her hand.

Then she had a better idea. She flipped on the back-porch light.

Then she pushed a chair against the counter and got up on it and opened the window over the sink.

He swung his face around and stared at her as she stuck her head out. He was a skinny guy with a short blond beard. His hair was blond, too, and thinning in front even though he couldn't have been more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight. There was snow caked on his pants legs and snow in his beard and eyebrows and he looked utterly wretched.

He gave a shake of his head as if to unlimber his neck and began talking. "Hey, look, could I use your telephone? I put my car in a ditch and I need help."

"Why'd you come to the back door?"

He waved a hand behind him. "I came out of the woods. I saw the lights down here and cut across a field and got all tangled up and now I don't even know if I ended up the same place I headed for. So could I use your phone?"

There was an almost pleading look on his face. He was shivering and miserable and didn't look dangerous at all. One of those people who make a mess of everything, even taking a shortcut on a blizzard night.

"Wait a minute," she said.

She climbed down off the chair. She thought about the knife again, then dismissed the idea as foolish.

He came into the kitchen, dripping snow and watching her worriedly with pale blue eyes—as if she might consign him once again to the mercies of the blizzard.

"How far did you walk?"

His eyes seemed to blank out on her. "How far? I don't know."

She handed him a kitchen towel. "You'd better dry your head."

"What? Oh yeah. Sure."

"Then we can go in the living room and you can use the phone."

"Phone. Yeah." As if it had just now occurred to him. "Is there, like, is there a taxi in this town?"

"Don't you want a wrecker to pull your car out of the ditch?"

"That can wait—I got to get someplace."

"We don't have any taxis. The town's too small. It's mainly a summer place. People from the city have vacation homes along the lake. All we get in winter is the overflow from the ski resorts."

He blinked at her. He seemed disoriented—not from the cold or his trudge through the snow, but from something else. Then she realized what it was. He's afraid, she thought.

"How'm I—how'm I going to get out of here? I got to get up to

Saranac Lake, someplace like that." He didn't add, "So I'll be safe." But he could've added it.

"There's a motor court in town."

"No—that's out."

He twisted his head around and stared at the wall, then twisted it back again.

"Look, you could drive me. You're used to this crap—you live up here. And I'd give you—what would I give you?—I'd give you fifty. Hell, I'd give you a hundred if you wanted."

"I'm expecting someone."

He twisted his head around again. He seemed to do that when he wanted to think—as if he were shutting her out momentarily and going into a quiet room where the ideas would flow.

He twisted his head back again. "Leave them a note. Leave it right on the front door. That'd be all right."

"Listen—I don't know what kind of trouble you're in, but you're obviously in *some* sort of trouble."

He blinked his eyes at her in horror. "No—what makes you think that?"

"Anyway, we have a sheriff's deputy here and maybe, well, you might want to talk to him."

"No—what's going on here? I just put my car in a ditch, that's all. What's wrong with that? And now I want to get to Saranac Lake—yeah, Saranac. Or Placid if it's closer."

"Well, I'm not going to take you. I don't like driving in this any more than you do. And I told you—I'm expecting someone."

He twisted his head away again. She could hear him mumbling to himself. Abruptly he turned back.

"All right—we'll do it the hard way."

He'd jammed his hands in the pockets of his coat. She'd thought it was because he was still cold. But now the left one came out holding a pistol.

Ben had used the emergency phone in a pull-off to call the cops, and now, a quick fifteen minutes later, a patrol car pulled in. Ben slid out of the Probe and walked over to it and opened the right-hand door. Frank Bauer, the deputy who patrolled this end of the county, sat behind the wheel. He was a friend of Sue Corwin's and maybe wanted to be more than that, and he didn't look too happy to see him.

"What're you doing up here?"

"I swung by to visit a friend," Ben said.

He didn't ask *what* friend—he'd already figured that out—and the look in his eyes said he didn't like it.

"Get in, Marciano, and we'll go look at this mysterious car of yours."

"It's got a bullet hole in the windshield. I thought you ought to know, Frank."

"You're pretty good at finding things with bullet holes in them," he said sarcastically.

"Hey, I caught one myself once."

They swung out of the parking lot. Bauer took it pretty fast—maybe just to put Ben in his place. But he could drive all right. He looked like he could mush through just about anything.

He shot a glance at Ben. "What do you figure about this car?"

"Not a lot. Just that the guy in the passenger seat didn't much like being there and took the first opportunity to get out. And, oh yeah, that the guy with the pistol was in the backseat."

"What makes you think that?"

"The placement of the bullet hole in the windshield. That's just a hunch, though. I'm a private investigator, not a ballistics expert."

"So what happened to the guy that got out—if you know so much?"

Ben shrugged. "He's off in the woods somewhere. Probably an icicle by now. You sure keep the heat cranked up in this car."

"I like my creature comforts. And if that's a cigarette you're reaching for, we got a policy against smoking in patrol cars."

They came up on the ditched Toyota, and Bauer brought the car to a halt. Ditched in more ways than one, Ben thought as he saw it again.

They got out and looked at it. Bauer opened the driver's-side door and peered at a sticker on the windshield. "It's a rental," he said.

"I already figured that."

"That means we'll be able to trace back and see who rented it."

"If they used their right names."

Ben walked around to the other side of the car. Bauer glanced at him once, then leaned back inside. And that was when Ben bent his knees and retrieved something from under the right front fender. He'd spotted it from the road. By the time Bauer looked up again it was already under his coat where the snow it had collected began to melt into his shirt.

"Nothing much I can do here," Bauer said, "except call a wrecker and get this thing hauled into town."

"What about the guy who ran off into the woods?"

"What about him?"

"That shot through the windshield might not have been the only one fired."

"What do you think? That he's out there wounded?"

"I don't have any idea, Frank."

Bauer got out his flashlight and swung the beam into the woods. Nothing but black tree trunks and white snow. The footprints weren't even visible anymore—which meant that a body probably wouldn't be either.

Bauer shook his head. "I'll need help, and where am I going to get it on a night like this? Come on. I'll take you back to your car."

As soon as Ben was inside the Probe, he lit a cigarette. He waited until the patrol car was gone, then he reached inside his coat and got the thing he'd found beside the car.

It was an eight-by-ten glossy—enlarged from the fuzzy look of it—and it had a heel print on the back of it where somebody'd stepped on it as they'd made a hasty exit from the Toyota. It showed a computer screen, and it looked, from the angle, as if it had been shot from above and behind. The contents of computer screens are notoriously difficult to photograph in normal light, but some sort of masking filter had been used and you could read every word and number. In the left-hand corner of the screen was a company logo that read *Aerosmith*. Directly below it were the first dozen lines of a computer program. It wasn't written in anything simple either, but in some sort of compressed scientific language.

Ben thought about the angle of the shot. You'd get an angle like that from a camera mounted near the top of an office wall—say, behind the grille of a ventilation duct. Then he noticed the fuzzy black bar that ran horizontally across the bottom part of the picture. No wonder the photograph was so grainy—it hadn't been taken directly off the computer; it was a shot of a television screen.

All at once Ben noticed how cold it was getting in the car. He also remembered that he had a rather important engagement and realized that excuses about wintry roads would only take him so far.

He got the engine started and switched on the headlights, and as he did so a car armored with snow passed by. It was a four-door, and his lights briefly flooded the driver's seat. What the hell, he thought. That was Sue at the wheel.

For about five seconds he didn't react. Then he shoved the gear lever into first and slewed out of the parking area.

It took him awhile to catch up on the slippery road, but when he did he saw she wasn't alone. There was a man in the passenger

seat beside her. He glanced over his shoulder as the headlights of Ben's Probe came up from behind.

Something was screwy here—something other than Sue being out on the road when she should've been home waiting for him. But he didn't know what it was until the man stared back at the Probe again. And then he only half knew it because even though a bell of recognition rang in his head, no name and no connection accompanied it.

He decided to juice things along a bit. He pulled up on the bumper of the sedan and flashed his brights on.

The guy stared back at him. Ben could see the shocked look in his eyes—as if it weren't headlights hitting him in the face but blows from a fist.

He jerked his head toward the front of the car again and hunched his shoulders. The bastard's terrified, Ben realized. Then he saw how tense Sue was at the wheel and figured out that the guy wasn't a welcome companion.

The man stared back again. He couldn't seem to resist doing it. Sue glanced sidewise at him, her hands tight on the wheel.

Holy crap, Ben thought. That's Gary Karlin. And wheels turned and tumblers fell into place and all at once he knew what this was about—the car in the ditch, the bullet hole in the windshield, and Karlin tense as a wound-up spring in the car ahead.

Karlin tore his gaze away and stared through the windshield. But he couldn't keep it up, and in less than ten seconds his eyes were locked on the Probe again.

Up ahead a vehicle with a flashing yellow light on the roof was approaching. It was the wrecker Frank Bauer had called.

Another sidewise glance from Sue. Her hands tensed on the wheel. Even at this distance Ben could see what she was going to do. He eased off the gas—and just in time, too.

Sue slammed on the brakes full force. The sedan spun on its axis and came to a stop with its headlights beaming into the woods. Ben just managed to get the Probe stopped before it slammed into the side of it. Sue flung herself out the left-hand door and ran toward the wrecker. Karlin made a grab at her and missed. Then he tumbled out the door on his own side. There was a steep bank on the right and he couldn't scramble away into the woods. And the driver of the wrecker had just now applied his brakes and was sliding to a stop on the left. Karlin had a pistol in his hand. He tried to run between the wrecker and the Probe. Ben pushed the door handle down, timed it as Karlin came around the

front fender, and then drove the door into his chest. Karlin's feet went out from under him, and Ben had to reach down and grab him by the collar and drag him out of the way of the rear wheels of the wrecker.

As soon as the wrecker had passed, he slid out of the car and put a knee in Karlin's back and then looked around for the pistol. It had skidded a dozen yards across the snow-packed road.

The wrecker had finally come to a stop, and a fortyish woman stuck her head out the window. She wore a knit cap with a baseball cap over the top of it.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Right now, you mean? Not a thing. When you catch up with Frank Bauer, tell him I've got one of the guys from the car down here."

The woman muttered something about nutcases and got the wrecker moving again.

Ben took his knee out of Karlin's back and crouched beside him.

"Hello, Gary."

Karlin jerked his head around and stared at him. "Do I know you?"

"My name's Marciano."

Karlin squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh hell—I do know you."

Sue picked up the pistol. "Rats—he left the safety on. I could've got away from him anytime I wanted."

Karlin was sitting up now with his back against the side of the car. "Do you think I wanted to hurt you? I just wanted to get out of here."

Ben had lit a fresh cigarette. "Gary here was so scared that he won't have to have another bowel movement for a month."

Sue laughed in spite of herself—surprised at herself for being so cool when she'd hit the brakes and even more surprised when it had turned out that Ben had been in the car behind.

Ben said: "Is that the pistol that put the hole in the windshield?"

Karlin jerked his head around. "How do you know about that?"

"Hey, I'm a detective. I know about everything. I know that one of them was in the backseat with a gun and when you tried to open the door and dive out, he panicked and fired. Then the woman lost control of the car and put you all in the ditch."

"The pistol landed right in my lap. I grabbed it just so they wouldn't have it. Then I took off for the woods. And it wasn't the

woman driving, it was the man. The woman was in the backseat with the gun."

Sue looked from one of them to the other. "I suppose all of this makes sense."

"It makes a lot of sense," Ben said. "Gary here's an expert on miniature surveillance cameras—remote TV stuff. I've never used him, but a lot of investigators I hang out with have. Some businessman figures the night shift's walking off with the store, so Gary sets up a hidden TV camera so he can catch them at it. That's probably how you got into Aerosmith, isn't it, Gary? Then while you were there you set up a camera for yourself."

"How do you know about Aerosmith?"

"I keep telling you, I'm a detective. And anyway, I found your photograph beside the Toyota—the one you used to give your buyers an advance look at the goods. They must've liked what they saw all right. They liked it so much they decided to hijack you."

Karlin shook his head. "I never should've agreed to meet them up here. But my mom lives in Saratoga, so I thought, what the hell."

Ben patted him on the head. "Sure, Gary, you saved the cost of a hotel room. And now you're going to save the cost of another because that's a patrol car I see coming, and I'll bet my socks it's got Frank Bauer in it."

Now it was Karlin's turn to say rats.

"What did you whisper to Karlin just before Frank took him away?" Sue asked.

They'd driven back to her place so she could leave her car, and now she was climbing into the front seat of the Probe.

"I told him not to open his mouth till he sees a lawyer."

"Ben—"

"No, that's what I told him all right. That'll give me a whole day's jump on the police, and I intend to take full advantage of it. Let's swing by the motor court before we go eat."

"Eddie's'll be closing soon."

"Not that soon. And I can always bribe him to stay open long enough to grill us a couple of steaks."

He swung the car around on the slick road.

She wrapped her fingers around his arm. "What do you expect to find at the motor court? Tell me or I'll hurt you."

"A videocassette. But go ahead and hurt me anyway. I like it when you get mean."

"And I'd like it if you'd level with me once in a while, Ben."

"Figure it out. The man and the woman walked away from the car. They sure as hell didn't trudge all the way back to Lake George or Saratoga. So where's it likely they ended up?"

"And you want to talk to them? Tonight?"

"I very much want to talk to them, and I want to do it before they've had a chance to do much thinking."

A few minutes later they were leaning against one side of the motel counter and Mary Chance, the woman who ran the place, was leaning against the other.

"They would've come in on foot about an hour ago," Ben said.

"We need to tell them where the wrecker took their car," Sue added.

"That'd be Mr. and Mrs. Yi. They're over in unit five. You want me to call them?"

"No, that's all right," Ben said. "We'll just stroll on over there. That's where our car is anyway."

"Now what?" Sue asked as they stepped out into the parking lot.

"Now we do some bluffing and walk home with the bacon."

Light showed through the window of unit five, so at least they wouldn't be waking anybody. Ben knocked on the door, then grinned at her as if they were playing some sort of Halloween trick.

A disheveled-looking Asian answered the door. If he had any spare clothes they were back at the *other* motel, the one they'd driven from in the Toyota.

He was short even for an Asian and looked incredibly young—in any bar you would've asked him for his ID. He stared at them with worried black eyes.

Ben flashed a leather folder at him—the one that held a card that identified him as a private investigator.

"My name's Ben Marciano and this is my associate, Mrs. Corwin. I think we need to talk, Mr. Yi."

The Asian backed up, mainly because Ben forced him to. Now Sue could see the woman. She stood beside the bed in bare feet with a ruined pair of stockings clutched in one hand. She was a lot taller than her husband and maybe a few years older.

"Are you police?" the man asked.

"Private type," Ben informed him.

"What does that mean?"

Ben smiled at him. "Haven't you seen any American movies, Mr. Yi?"

If he had, Sue thought, he would've watched private eyes doing all the things they never did in real life—pulling guns, jumping

malefactors, breaking and entering—and maybe that was the idea Ben wanted to plant in his mind.

"I think you better get out," the man said.

"Uh-uh. You took a shot at somebody tonight, and that's serious business."

At that point the woman spoke up. Her English was much better than her husband's. She might have been a bit smarter, too—but not smart enough.

She said: "I didn't mean to fire the pistol. We were afraid. We had money and that man might have done anything."

Yi tried to shut her up with a violent wave of his hand, but she went right on.

"Did I kill him? Is he dead?"

"She's confused," the man said desperately. "We did nothing. She had blow on head. When car skidded."

"You didn't kill him," Ben said. "But you sure scared him. Now let's discuss the videotape—because that's what I'm really interested in."

The man made a noise in his throat like a grunt—as if Ben had just hit him in the stomach. The woman bunched the stockings in her hand. Ben merely smiled.

They're fresh off the boat, Sue realized. They think everyone over here runs around with a pistol—even Ben probably, who never touches one. So they carried one of their own to the meeting with Karlin and made a mess of everything.

Ben put his rump on the arm of a chair. "I won't ask who you're working for in Shanghai or Taipei or Hong Kong. Probably some uncle or grandfather who's got an interest in the computer business. But I'll tell you who I represent—a company called Aero-smith—and they want Karlin's videotape back. And if you think I don't know all about it, let me tell you what's on it. It shows a programmer scrolling through a proprietary computer program and you can read every line. If your boss gets hold of it, he'll be duplicating it and selling it all over Asia and maybe North America as well. Now you can deal with me or you can deal with the cops, but one thing you can't do is get out of here. You're stuck till morning."

The man clenched and unclenched his fists. "What happens if we give back tape?"

"Well, bye and bye you'll probably get a visit from the Immigration and Naturalization Service. But if you get on a plane quick you can even avoid that."

At the mention of the INS their faces fell. Apparently they liked

it over here—even if you did have to tote a gun. But maybe they'd even liked that part of it.

"You won't give us money?"

"What do you think?"

"But we went to a lot of trouble! We took risks!"

"Seems to me it was Gary Karlin who took all the risks. All you did was ride around in a warm Toyota and then run it into a ditch. Now are you going to deal with me or are you going to deal with the cops?"

The woman butted in then, in Chinese, her voice rising several octaves more than was necessary. She's giving him hell, Sue thought. Probably chewing him out for screwing everything up. Then the man appeared to give her some of it back. Ben let it go on for a while, then did some butting in of his own.

"Are you two finished yet?"

"Yes. Finished," the woman said shortly.

There was a shoulder bag hanging from the back of a chair. The woman walked over to it and retrieved a videotape from one of the pockets. The man made that grunting noise in his throat again. Then he repeated it as she handed the tape to Ben.

Ben stood up. "This better not be a bootleg copy of *Pretty Woman*," he said.

"It's what you want. Now please, leave us alone."

A minute later they were back out in the wind-driven snow of the parking lot.

Sue took Ben's arm. "What if that really is a copy of *Pretty Woman*?"

"What the hell—I've never seen it. But if it's Karlin's tape, then Aerosmith's going to be happy as hell to get it back."

She shook her head. "You always manage to make a buck out of these things, Ben. Even out of a car stuck in a ditch."

He didn't answer, but she knew what he would have said if he had. That it wasn't just the money, it was the fun of turning a trick on Karlin and a couple of amateur program thieves and maybe on Frank Bauer as well.

Later—much later—after the snow had stopped, in fact—she lay in bed and watched blooms of frost form on the windows. The bedroom was growing colder, but the bed itself was an oasis of warmth and she could feel Ben's breath as it caressed the night-time tangle of her hair. Her Ben, she thought. And held that notion as she drifted off to sleep. ●

ZERO TOLERANCE

by Bill Pronzini

The little girl in the polka-dot playsuit was a holy terror. So was her mother. In fact, the kid wasn't all that bad—just spoiled and rambunctious—compared to the mom-thing that had spawned her.

The whole sorry business was the mother's fault. You couldn't lay any blame on the child; she hadn't been taught any better. You could lay a little of the blame on me, I suppose, but not much when you looked at it all in perspective. No, by God, the mother was the villain of the piece. An even nastier villain in some ways than the pudgy guy in the leather jacket.

It started with the little girl. She kept finding me out of all the other shoppers crowding the Safeway aisles, like some sort of pint-sized heat-seeking missile. First she charged out from behind a bin full of corn in the produce section, accidentally banged my shin with one of her cute red pumps, and then charged off without so much as an upward or backward glance. Next she showed up in the meat department, standing directly behind me when I turned with a package of ground round in my hand; I had to do a nifty juking sidestep to avoid tripping over her, but it wasn't as nifty as it might have been because I dropped the package and the cellophane wrapping split and the right leg of my trousers took on the sudden appearance of clothing in a splatter movie. And finally there was the collision in the cat- and dog-food aisle.

I was pushing my cart near the end of the aisle, minding my own business, looking down unhappily at the hamburger-stained pant-

This new story by Bill Pronzini also appears in a collection featuring his "Nameless" detective. (See *Spadework*; Crippen & Landru Publishers /P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505.) It is a mark of the author's extraordinary talent that he has been able to develop his character in 25 years' worth of stories and novels without ever giving him a name. †

leg when she came flying around the corner with her arms outflung at her sides—playing airplane or some damn thing. Neither of us saw each other in time; she banged into the cart with a startled yelp. Just as this happened, the mother—an attractive doe-eyed blonde in her twenties—pushed her cart around the corner. She let out a yelp of her own when the kid bounced off and flopped down on a chubby little backside. She wasn't hurt; her face scrunched up but she didn't cry or even whimper. But the way the mother reacted, you'd have thought her daughter had been mortally wounded. She rushed over, picked the child up, brushed her off, examined her with a probing eye, clutched her possessively, and then glared at me as if I were something she'd just found caked on the bottom of her shoe.

"What's the matter with you?" she said accusingly. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

Under ordinary circumstances I would have diffused the situation by smiling, muttering a polite comment, and sidling off to continue my shopping. But the circumstances tonight were not ordinary. There was my sore shin, and my bloody pantleg, and the facts that I'd had a long, tiring day and Kerry was working late and it was my turn to do both the shopping and the cooking of dinner, and the additional fact that I have zero tolerance for parents who allow their children to run wild in supermarkets, department stores, and other public places. I managed the smile all right, a tight little one, but not the polite comment or the sidling off.

"And why don't you curb your kid," I said, "before she really gets hurt?"

"What?" It came out more like a squawk than a word.

"Just what I said, lady. This is the third time your daughter's run into me—"

"How dare you!"

"How dare I what?"

"Talk to me that way. Accuse Amy of attacking you."

I wasn't smiling anymore. "I didn't say she attacked me—"

"Of all the insane things. A six-year-old child and an old brute like you."

"Old brute?" I said. "Listen—"

"You practically run Amy down with your cart and then you . . ." Words failed her. She sputtered and said, "Oh!" and then realized that we'd drawn a small group of onlookers. This spurred her on; she was the type that would always play to a crowd. "Did any of

you see it?" she asked the gawkers. "He almost ran my little girl down with his cart."

Nobody admitted to having seen anything, but there were angry mumbles and a couple of hostile looks thrown my way.

"She lets the kid run loose," I said, "play games in the aisles—"

"I never runned loose!" cute little Amy said. "I never did!"

Some guy came up and poked me on the shoulder. "Why don't you pick on somebody your own size?"

"I wasn't picking on anybody."

"Nice family like this," a henna-rinsed woman said. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

The nice family stood hating me with their bright doe eyes. The baby holy terror stuck her tongue out at me. The finger-poker did his annoying thing again. "Apologize to them, why don't you?"

"Apologize? I'm the one who—"

I stopped because nobody was listening; I didn't have a sympathetic ear in the bunch. Tiny warning bells went off in my head. A no-win situation if I'd ever found myself in one. Let it go on much longer and it would turn ugly and escalate into an incident. So? So I bit my tongue. I took a tight grip on my offended pride. And I lied and dissembled like a coward.

"Okay," I said, "it was all my fault. The child's not hurt. Suppose we just forget the whole thing."

That satisfied the gawkers. Within ten seconds they were gone, though not without a few parting glances of dislike in my direction. The mother set the little girl down—as soon as Amy's feet touched the floor she was off again like a Piper Cub taking wing—and turned back to her cart. She tried to jockey it past mine at the same time I tried to jockey past hers. This produced a mutter on my part, an exasperated sigh and another angry glare on hers. We finally managed to clear each other without clashing, and she went her way and I went mine—but not until we'd traded a couple more barbs, trite but heartfelt.

Hers: "The stupid jerks you run into."

Mine: "No truer words, Mommie Dearest."

I finished loading my cart in a dark funk, wheeled it to the checkout stands and into the shortest line. I had just transferred the last item onto the conveyor thing they have when something banged hard into the backs of my legs. I swung around.

The blonde with her cart, naturally. "Oh," she said in a voice like maple syrup over arsenic, lying through her teeth, "I'm so

sorry, I didn't mean to bump you like that."

I swallowed eight or nine choice words. Sweet young Amy was clutching Mommy's skirt; she showed me her tongue again. I resisted an impulse to answer in kind, reminding myself that I was above such childish behavior, I really was. I put my back to the nice family and kept it there the entire time my purchases were being rung up and paid for. I didn't look their way as I left the store, either, for fear that I wasn't as far above childish behavior as I cared to believe.

It was a cold, foggy night outside, but the air tasted good and it had a soothing effect on my abused feelings. The parking lot at the Diamond Heights Safeway is almost always full in the evening, and tonight was no exception; I'd had to park toward the back of the lot, near the exit onto Diamond Heights Boulevard. All I could see over that way, through the swirls and eddies of fog, were vague shapes and outlines.

I spotted the pudgy guy in the leather jacket at about the same time I located my car. He was wandering around in the general vicinity, about three cars north of mine. He stopped when he saw me, turned his head partway as I neared with my rattling cart. When I was close enough for him to get a good look at me, his head turned again and he moved away. Not far, though, just over to a backed-in Ford Econoline van new enough to still be wearing dealer plates. He bent and peered at the van's front end, as if something about it had snagged his attention.

There was a furtiveness about him that I didn't like. I kept watching him while I put the groceries away in the trunk. He straightened after about ten seconds, went around on the far side of the van without looking my way again. I shut the trunk and approached the driver's door. The van was bulky enough and the fog thick enough so that I couldn't tell where the pudgy guy had gone. He might have continued on toward the far north end of the lot, or he might still be lurking somewhere near the Ford.

I got into the car. The fog had laid thick films of wetness over the windows; I couldn't see through them. I scooted over on the passenger side, rolled the window down about two inches. The van was visible again through the narrow opening, as was the empty asphalt lane in front of it. There was still no sign of the pudgy guy.

Nothing happened for about three minutes. I was still trying to make up my mind what to do when somebody materialized out of the fog over that way.

It was the blond woman pushing her grocery cart, little Amy skipping along beside her.

And where they went was straight to the Ford van.

The thing had four doors; the woman unlocked the rear one and began shoving sacks inside while the baby holy terror ran back and forth in front. It's all right, I told myself, nothing's going down. But I had my hand on the door handle, my shoulder butted up against the door itself.

The woman finished loading her groceries, slammed the rear door. As she unlocked the driver's I heard her call, "Amy, you come here this instant. I've had enough of your—"

That was as far as she got. The pudgy guy appeared around the front of the van, something dark and pointy in one hand that could only be a gun, moving with such suddenness that Amy shrieked and ran to her mother. He got there at the same time she did, yanked the keys out of the woman's hand, and then slugged her hard enough to pitch her backward into the grocery cart.

I was out of the car by then, running. The guy was half inside the van when he saw me; he tried to squirm back out instead of going all the way in and locking the door, and that was his mistake. I hit the half-open door with my shoulder before he could slide clear of it, knocked him back against the side of the van. He struggled to get the gun up on me, but I pinned his arm with my left hand, slammed him in the belly with my right, and brought my knee driving upward at the same time. He made a thin squealing noise that blended right in with the screaming of the woman and the shrieking of the child. I smacked him in the belly again, twisted the gun out of his fingers, then punched him on the jaw as he was starting to sag. It was a good, solid, satisfying punch: He went all the way down and lay twitching at my feet.

Things stayed somewhat chaotic for the next couple of minutes. Some people came running up out of the fog, three or four of them asking alarmed questions. The woman had quit yowling and was on her feet again, tending to Amy, who was still going off in up-and-down riffs like a busted fire siren. I stuffed the gun into my coat pocket, started to lean down to make sure the pudgy guy wasn't going to give me any more trouble, and somebody pushed in close enough to jostle me.

It was the finger-poker from inside. Glowering, he said, "What's going on here? What'd you do this time—"

I gave him back his glower and told him to shut up.

"What?" he said. "What?"

"You heard me. Shut up and go call the police."

"The police? What—"

It was my turn to do the poking, hard under his sternum. It gave me almost as much satisfaction as the punch to the pudgy guy's jaw. "The police. Now."

He spluttered some, but he went.

I glanced at the blond woman, who was clutching her daughter and staring at me with one eye as round as a half dollar; the other, where the guy had slugged her, was already puffy and half closed. Then I returned my attention to her attacker. He was lying on his side, moaning a little now, his legs drawn up and both hands clutched between them; there was a smear of blood on his jaw and his pain was evident. I felt mildly sorry for the woman. I didn't feel a bit sorry for him.

Carjackers are something else I have zero tolerance for.

The cops came pretty quick, asked questions, put handcuffs on the pudgy guy, and hauled him off to jail. The crowd that had gathered gradually dispersed. And I was alone once more with a calmed-down Amy and her calmed-down mother.

The woman hadn't said a direct word to me the whole time, and she didn't say anything to me now. Instead she pushed the kid into the van, hoisted herself in under the wheel. Well, that figures, I thought. I walked away to my car.

But before I could get in, the woman was out of the van again and hurrying my way. She stopped with about four feet separating us. Changed her mind, I thought. Thanks or an apology coming up after all. I smiled a little, waiting.

And she said, "I just want you to know—I still think you're a jerk."

After which she did an about-face and back to the van she went.

I stood there while she fired it up, switched on the headlights, swung around in my direction. The driver's window was down; I saw her face and the little girl's face clearly as they passed by.

Amy stuck out her tongue.

And the mom-thing gave me the finger.

Right, I thought with more sadness than anger as I watched the taillights bleed away into the fog.

Zero tolerance night in what was fast becoming a zero tolerance world. ●



THE FATTED GOOSE

by Hayford Peirce

Unlike many Tahitian women who grow noticeably stouter—though no less high-spirited—with age, Angelina Tama had retained her youthful slimness in spite of having borne four children and, even more burdensome, being married to French Polynesia's most noted trencherman.

Part of her slimness was due to genetics; the rest could be attributed to caution.

"She read the menu," grumbled her husband, Alexandre, who was easily three or four times the size of his diminutive wife. "Nothing on it but goose and foie gras, so she decided she wouldn't come. Imagine that: a wife of *mine* who doesn't like foie gras." His great belly shook with mirth as he wagged his massive head in mock dismay. Wearing a long-sleeved white shirt, dark blue trousers, and shiny brown sandals, the chief of police of Papeete, Tahiti's capital city, ran his eyes curiously about the kitchen of

this just-opened inn deep in the island's mountainous interior. Chez Ma Mère l'Oie—At Mother Goose's—was at the far end of a dozen kilometers of nearly impassable road and Tama wondered how it would survive, even if its cuisine was as good as its owner promised it would be.

"So get yourself another wife," shouted Michel-Pierre LaRochelle, the restaurant's owner, above the sudden roar of a torrential downpour crashing against the roof,

"like I'm going to do one of these days, one with some meat on her bones, not like little Miss No-tits over there." The burly, white-clad Frenchman jerked his head contemptuously in the direction of his graceful but undeniably boyishly svelte wife as she disappeared through the kitchen's swinging doors.

Tama stared coldly at the walrus-moustached Alsatian whose protruding belly was nearly a match for his own. In spite of his own occasionally Rabelaisian nature, the *Commissaire de Police* detested gratuitous vulgarity, especially when directed at so noticeably gracious—and highly attractive—a person as the wife of this loutish goose farmer and innkeeper. Pockmarked and bulbous-nosed, with dirty gray ringlets of greasy hair spilling from beneath his stained chef's toque, this relatively recent arrival in Polynesia was far from being *sympathique*. "You say there is a room ready for us?" demanded Tama, casting a dark scowl at the sheet of water cascading relentlessly down the kitchen windows..

"Just the one. I don't know how anyone ever gets anything done on this damned island with nothing but these Tahitian monkeys working for you. Instead of the eight rooms they promised to have ready last month, there's still just one." Scowling ferociously, LaRochelle yanked open one of the many glass doors of a gleaming new commercial refrigeration unit and peered suspiciously at a closed compartment holding a dozen or so small dishes filled with curlicues of butter. "But don't you worry, *Monsieur le Commis-*

Many authors who write about exotic locales rely on reference books to fill in necessary details. Not Hayford Peirce. The author lived in the place that inspires his fiction for many years, and when he returns on holiday nowadays, he has the added aide to on-the-spot research of a son-in-law who is a Tahitian *Inspecteur de Police* in the vice squad. †

saire, your room is just waiting for you, with two fine beds. If you and your Chink friend here are up to those kind of tricks, you can always push them together—" he chuckled coarsely "—or I can send my own sack of bones up for the two of you since you didn't bring your own." His chuckle became a guffaw.

Tama glanced at his companion, a muscular little Eurasian male in neat white shorts and a hideously garish Hawaiian shirt. Did Colonel Yashimoto understand anything this ghastly goose farmer was saying? He hoped not. If it weren't raining with all the fury that only a tropical rainy season could provide, he certainly would never contemplate spending the night under the roof of so gross a bigot and vulgarian. Tama turned back to their host just in time to see the Alsatian poke a hairy finger into a piece of soft butter, then wipe his finger against his already richly stained white tunic. "Isn't that butter supposed to be refrigerated?" asked Tama, always willing to talk food with even the most loutish of creatures.

"And it is—perfectly. Look: separate butter and cheese compartments with their own temperature controls. Haven't you ever noticed how the butter in this damned country is always too hard or too soft? Not at Chez Ma Mère l'Oie—at least *here* the butter's going to be just the temperature it's supposed to be."

"Excellent, I detest butter that's too hard to spread." Tama waved a gigantic mahogany-colored hand at another compartment in the refrigerator. Here were silver platters with thickly sliced pieces of creamy beige foie gras. "You've numbered the platters on the bottom so no one will know which foie gras we're eating?"

"Just like a wine tasting," agreed LaRochelle in his thick Alsatian accent. "Not even a professional snoop like *Monsieur le Commissaire* will be able to tell which is which—except by tasting, and then you'll *know* which one is mine—the best one."

"I certainly hope so," said Tama with complete sincerity, for only the purported excellence of the inn's homemade foie gras could keep him any longer in the company of this appalling restaurateur. "When does the judging begin?"

"As soon as the last of the judges gets—Hey there, *you*, Cherry Cheeks, what the devil are you doing with that aspic?"

An ivory-skinned half-Tahitian in his late teens looked up with doelike eyes from a cutting board where he was dicing sheets of glittering brown aspic. "Just . . . just what you told me to do, *Monsieur le patron*," he stammered. His already noticeably rosy cheeks flushed even redder.

"Mince alors!" LaRocheille lurched forward in sudden fury. "I told you to—" He stumbled against an enormously fat yellow dog that had waddled into the kitchen with bushy tail awaggle. "*Bor-del de Dieu!*" screamed the Frenchman, unleashing a vicious kick against the dog's flanks. "Martine, get this beast of yours out of the kitchen before I feed it to the geese!" Yelping piteously, the dog fled into a corner. "Now then, you, Cherry Cheeks! What I told you was . . ."

With a disgusted shake of his head, Tama pulled his companion toward the swinging doors. "I'd like to have that . . . that *fellow* in my little jail for a day or two," he muttered in lightly accented English. "I'd teach him some manners."

"Aren't all French chefs supposed to be temperamental?" asked Colonel Yashimoto with a faint grin as they moved into the inn's wood-beamed dining room.

"Temperamental, not vicious. I'd stuff him down the throats of his own geese! Except, of course, that would ruin the foie gras, and he's the only one on the island who's tried to make any in thirty years." Tama's angry black eyes moved about the room.

Two Tahitian waitresses in bright red dresses decorated with white hibiscuses were lighting candles on linen-topped tables. In the flickering yellow light, crystal wine glasses began to glitter enticingly. On the far side of the room, in a massive fieldstone fireplace, a waiter was fanning the flames that licked tentatively at three enormous logs. Here in the island's mountains, far from the warm coastal plains, it was always chilly at night, especially in the midst of their frequent cloudbursts.

Next to the fireplace, the restaurateur's wife was arranging enormous sprays of gaudy hibiscus and creamy gardenia blooms along the table on which the foie gras for the tasting would be presented. Tama nodded reluctantly. It wasn't a bad idea of the cloddish innkeeper: a competition between his own homemade foie gras and the finest that Périgord and Alsace could offer, with a panel of distinguished local bon vivants as judges. Just the thing to drum up a little free publicity for Tahiti's newest, and most inaccessible, restaurant.

Madame la patronne made a final adjustment to the yellow and orange hibiscus in her own jet-black hair and stepped back to admire the table's floral arrangements while, in turn, Alexandre Tama let his eyes come to rest admiringly upon her.

Martine LaRocheille was a tall but delicate, almost fragile-look-

ing *demi-Chinoise* in her early thirties with a lovely oval face, large almond eyes, and glossy black hair that fell ruler-straight to the small of her back. Like many *demi-Chinoises*, she enjoyed the best of both worlds: the golden-brown skin of the Polynesian and the dainty features of the Chinese. Wearing a shiny green silk dress embroidered with golden dragons that fit her boyish figure like an exotic skin, she was, Tama thought, as beautiful a half-Chinese girl as he had ever seen—no matter *what* the size of her breasts. How this lovely creature put up with so brutish a husband was hard to fathom. . . .

"A glass of champagne, messieurs?" A smiling waitress proffered a laden tray. "The buses with most of the other guests are just beginning to arrive."

A few minutes later, in spite of the thunderous rain that occasionally made conversation difficult, the dining room of the small inn was nearly filled with loudly chattering guests. "Hrmph," rumbled Tama to his companion, "it looks like *le tout Papeete* is here, the same old faces, never anyone new. I guess LaRoche brought them out in a couple of special buses. I hope they don't fall in the ditch on the way home. If they do, they'll never get out in this deluge."

"And where's your charming wife?" demanded an enormous Tahitian lady whose girth was nearly as great as Tama's and who was the Minister of Social Affairs for this island group that spread across an area of the Pacific as large as Europe or the United States. "I knew *you'd* be here—anywhere there's a free meal and drinks you'll find Alexandre Tama!"

The *Commissaire de Police* smiled tolerantly. "Home—she can't stand foie gras. So I brought our house guest from Hawaii instead. This is Colonel Yashimoto, chief of the state police on Big Island. The two of us were in school together in Honolulu years ago, where he was known as Mad Dog—though I can't now remember why."

"Big Island! I adore Big Island! Do you know Kona, Colonel Yashimoto?"

"*Monsieur le Commissaire?*" It was the ethereal Martine LaRoche tapping shyly on Tama's arm. "If you could come along? The other judges are here; we're about to begin the tasting."

An hour later Tama and Mad Dog Yashimoto sat by themselves at their own candle-lit table while Madame LaRoche directed the serving of enormous pieces of foie gras onto sparkling beds of diced aspic and aspic rounds. To accompany the goose liver, the

handsome half-Tahitian youth LaRoche had disdainfully called Cherry Cheeks glided from table to table pouring golden Sauterne into crystal glasses.

"How can you eat any more of that pâté?" marveled the Hawaiian as he watched Tama slather butter that, as LaRoche had promised, was the perfect consistency, upon a triangle of toast and then add a thick wedge of foie gras. "I must have seen you put away at least two pounds of the stuff already."

The *Commissaire de Police* winced. "Foie gras, Mad Dog, *foie gras*! Pâté is to foie gras as . . . as a McDonald's hamburger is to a perfectly marbled ribeye steak with Béarnaise sauce!"

Colonel Yashimoto pushed away his own largely uneaten piece of foie gras and nibbled gingerly at a rubbery piece of aspic. "You mean there's a difference? Up on Big Island, even in the fanciest hotels, we peasants always call it pâté de foie gras."

"An *enormous* difference, like the difference between my *opu* here and Inspector Opuu." Tama chuckled appreciatively as he tapped his gargantuan stomach, for *opu* means belly in Tahitian, while the faithful Inspector Opuu was one of the skinniest men in the islands. "Real foie gras, the stuff we have here before us and that the charming Mr. LaRoche makes out back, is nothing but the entire liver from a specially fattened goose and a little seasoning. Sometimes it's two or three livers pressed gently together, then cooked very, very slowly in a very low oven. Or sometimes they just wrap a hot towel around it and leave it to cook by itself overnight. *That's* foie gras. Pâté is anything that's ground up. Those cans of deviled ham we used to eat on picnics—that's pâté!"

"It is? Deviled ham?"

"And canned dog food—that's pâté too." The *Commissaire de Police* chewed his foie gras appreciatively. "Where people get confused, even Frenchmen, is that sometimes leftover bits and pieces of genuine foie gras are ground up with pork fat and veal and God knows what else and *that's* what's called pâté de foie gras. It can be pretty good sometimes, especially if you put in a truffle or two, but foie gras it's not."

"Live and learn." Colonel Yashimoto pushed his plate away. "And this guy's foie gras is *good*? Did it win the tasting?"

"Yes, it really is good. And it really did win the tasting. Against canned foie gras, it's true, but still, I'm amazed: foie gras as good as this, made in Tahiti! If he can keep it up, he's going to make a fortune."

"Not from me, he's not," declared the American. "Here, you can have the rest of mine. And all of this awful aspic, too." He bounced a piece derisively against his plate. "Look, it's just like rubber."

"No, his *gelée* isn't up to his foie gras, it's definitely the commercial variety, right out of a package. Very nasty stuff." Tama pursed his lips. "I wonder, though, if we can't make it disappear by some other way than just eating it? Let's see now, I think this menu would be just about the right size if we tore it in half. . . ."

Colonel Yashimoto watched curiously as Tama ripped the piece of paper neatly in two, then reached for a piece of shiny round aspic the size of a silver dollar. Laying the aspic precisely in the middle of the paper, the Commissaire carefully folded the paper around it until it was wrapped securely in a tight little packet of multiple folds.

"Now then," said Tama, tapping the packet against the rim of a wine glass, "what we'll do is place this right here in the middle of the table. And then we'll put your hand over it like this just to make sure it doesn't go anywhere, and then I'll put *my* hand over yours to make doubly sure—" his enormous hand entirely covered Colonel Yashimoto's "—and then I'll say the magic words, 'Be gone, wretched aspic!' And then we'll open it up to see if it's really gone." He withdrew his hand. "Here, *you* open it."

The unfolded packet was, of course, empty. "I suppose you'll never tell me how you did that?" said Colonel Yashimoto sourly.

"Of course not—I'd be drummed out of the magician's union."

"Then you'd better not try finding it in my ear later on—or I'll show you just why they used to call me Mad Dog."

The next course was a simple salad with a few pieces of diced foie gras scattered among the garlicky croutons. It was followed by a slice of foie gras that had been sautéed golden brown along with small green grapes. "Marvelous," rhapsodized the *Commissaire de Police* as he washed it down with a chilled Gewurztraminer from Alsace, and even Colonel Yashimoto agreed that it was worth tasting.

"And now," said Tama, "we come to a very interesting junction in the menu. We can have either the *confit d'oie*, which is preserved goose fried brown and crispy, with sarladaise potatoes, or we can have the filet mignon on an artichoke heart stuffed with foie gras, accompanied by bordelaise sauce. You know," he said to the awestruck waitress, "I think I'll have one of *each*—that way.

we'll be sure of using up all of those poor geese who so nobly contributed to making the foie gras."

"They really do pour food down a funnel into the poor geese," asked Colonel Yashimoto as they watched red wine being poured, "to make them fatter?"

"I'm afraid so. The whole point is to make the liver as big as possible. The liver for a good foie gras is at least three or four times the size of a normal one."

The Hawaiian shuddered slightly. "You don't think that's awfully cruel?"

"I don't know," said Tama with a massive sigh. "The anti-foie gras people say it's cruel, the people who raise the geese say the geese love it and follow them around just *begging* to be fed." He wagged a thick finger. "Suppose I turn *you* into a goose—and let you find out for yourself?"

Some time later Colonel Yashimoto picked halfheartedly at his enormous piece of crispy goose breast. "I suppose there'll be foie gras ice cream and then pitchers of goose fat to pour into the coffee? Can you get me an appointment with a cardiologist for tomorrow morning?"

"Nonsense! It's been scientifically shown that Frenchmen who eat geese and goose fat live far longer than—"

"More wine, *messieurs*?" murmured the rosy-cheeked Tahitian waiter. He poured for Colonel Yashimoto, then reached across to pour for Tama.

"You dolt!" hissed Michel-Pierre LaRochelle, who, freshly changed into a clean white tunic, had been making his way triumphantly from table to table through the dining room, a glass of champagne in hand. "I *told* you to always pour from the right! Can't you damned faggots ever get *anything* straight?" Seizing the bottle from the boy's hand, he poured a glass for Tama. "Excuse me, *Monsieur le Commissaire*, someday I'll see if he can't get *something* right." He thrust the bottle back at the cowering waiter. "Here! Now go do it right for the rest of the guests! Or I'll kick your cute little ass for you!" He reached out and pinched the boy viciously on the cheek. "There, maybe *that'll* help you remember, Cherry Cheeks! Enjoy the rest of your meal, *messieurs*," he murmured unctuously and swaggered on to the next table.

Tama's fingers drummed furiously on the table. "I can't believe the *Inspecteur de Travail* will permit such behavior! I'll personally have a word with—"

He was interrupted by a startlingly loud sound that it took a moment to identify as silverware being banged against a crystal wineglass. Tama and Colonel Yashimoto peered around the room until their eyes came to the far corner. Here a thickset woman in a plain black dress stood by her table, whanging a glass lustily. In the restaurant's flickering candlelight all Tama could see of her clearly was an enormous mop of thick blond hair and the largest heart-shaped violet sunglasses he had ever seen.

"Good evening, friends," said the blonde in a voice that was hardly more than a husky whisper and that yet filled the room effortlessly. "I hope you've all enjoyed your delicious dinner." She cast a broad smile to all sides while two male companions moved away from the table and began taking photographs. A few tentative bursts of applause died away as the flashbulbs flared brightly.

"A delicious dinner procured from the bodies of tortured *animals!*" cried the woman with sudden passion, pulling off her blond wig and throwing it to the floor. A moment later, as the flashbulbs flared again, she tossed away her sunglasses.

"Dear God, it's Valérie Valescu," muttered Tama disgustedly in English. "Just what we needed to ruin a perfect meal."

"Valérie Valescu the *actress?*" murmured Colonel Yashimoto in awestruck tones. "But . . ."

"... she's nearly as fat as I am. No, retirement hasn't been kind to her. I wonder how *she* got in here?"

The one-time sex goddess of the French cinema shook her closely cropped black hair with its famous stripe of platinum gold running across the top and raised a hand to silence the once-again noisy dining room. "I know, dear friends, that none of us likes to think about where our delicious food comes from, but sometimes we *have* to! When we have beautiful scallops of pale white veal, for instance, do we think about the tortured little calves locked up in their—"

The voice of the world's most famous animal-rights activist was drowned out by a wave of hisses and derisory catcalls, as if she were a nearsighted referee at a football game.

"*Hou! Hou!*"

"Shut up and let us eat!"

"Take off your clothes and go back to showing your ass!"

All the time her two grinning companions were hopping about the room and rapidly snapping pictures.

"So *that's* how she got in," shouted Tama to Colonel Yashimoto

above the uproar. "Those clowns with the cameras are the owner and editor of one of the local rags. I knew she was here in the islands incógnito, but thought she'd gone over to Brando's island to commune with nature at the bird sanctuary. She must have heard about this little dinner and figured she could get some free publicity by smuggling herself in."

"She seems to have succeeded—now they've got VCRs going. All of this will be on television, I suppose."

"All over the world. She—"

"Please!" cried Valérie Valescu, vainly rapping her fork against her water glass. "Please, let me—"

The chorus of boos grew louder.

The still-sensual lips of the middle-aged ex-sex kitten grew tight. With a surprisingly athletic gesture she threw the glass precisely into the middle of the fireplace, where it smashed noisily. "Will you just let me *finish*?" she pleaded into the sudden silence. "Behind this restaurant, there are pens where the owner keeps his poor tortured geese. I beg of you: Go look at them, ask yourselves if—"

Once again her voice was drowned out, and now the inn's owner, Michel-Pierre LaRochelle, could be seen stalking ominously across the dining room.

"Then *eat* your dirty foie gras," screamed V. V. above the clamor, "eat your filthy liver from tortured birds!" From somewhere she produced a white plastic bag. A moment later she was throwing gleaming brown objects in all directions. One of them landed squarely against the crisp white tunic of the restaurant's owner, and it was then that Tama identified what she was throwing.

"Chicken livers," he bellowed gleefully, "she's throwing raw chicken livers! Look at that, she got old Dr. Vonnegut right in the face!"

Another glob of liver landed on the creamy white breasts of a redhead in startling décolleté. The horrified woman began to scream hysterically. Two more handfuls were fired at random and then Michel-Pierre LaRochelle's hairy hands fastened around V. V.'s neck.

"Let me go!" she cried, grinding chicken liver into his face. "Murderer! Torturer! Sadist!"

Equally enraged, the half-blinded restaurateur pummeled the screeching actress with a flurry of blows as he dragged her to the front door and manhandled her into the night. Cursing furiously,

he turned back to look for Valérie Valescu's companions, but they had made a prudent withdrawal. A ragged volley of cheers went up from the stunned diners as Michel-Pierre LaRoche vanished behind the swinging doors of his kitchen.

"Well!" exclaimed Colonel Yashimoto admiringly. "This *has* been an evening worth seeing! Thank you for bringing me, Sandy, it was even worth the foie gras ice cream!"

"Bah!" muttered Alexandre Tama darkly. "Children, all of them. There's something about this island that turns everyone into children."

"I guess our sex goddess is gone, but what are you going to do about our gracious host? That looked pretty much like common assault to me, what he was doing to V. V."

The Commissaire de Police snorted angrily. "It's up here in the mountains, completely out of my jurisdiction. And why should I? I *love* foie gras. Let her go raise a fuss about baby seals or iguanas—those I *don't* eat!"

Tama spent a restless night in the sole room the inn had ready for guests.

Perhaps because he was in a strange bed that, though large, still wasn't quite large enough.

Or perhaps because Mad Dog Yashimoto in the adjoining bed occasionally broke into light snores before once again falling silent.

At some point during the night he came awake in the darkness with a sudden start and a violently throbbing head. Maybe he *really* shouldn't have had that last glass of champagne. Water, he badly needed several liters of water. Fumbling for the lamp beside his bed, he located it only to discover that the light wouldn't come on. He fell back with a groan. Obviously, way up here in the mountains, the Mother Goose inn had to generate its own electricity. And, as in most little places like this, the generator was equally obviously turned off at night to economize on fuel.

Tama muttered to himself, found his bedside glass of water in the darkness, and eventually drifted back to an uneasy sleep.

Sometime later the thunderous rain suddenly stopped and in the absolute silence that ensued he could hear the frantic honking of geese. No foie gras without geese, he thought disjointedly, and no geese without honking. And no honking without Valérie Valescu. And no V. V. without . . . Rolling over, he fell into a troubled sleep in which he was pursued by giant geese waving bright

red livers held before them in dainty white human hands.

He was awakened again by having his shoulder violently shaken. "Come quickly, *Monsieur le Commissaire*! My husband is hurt, I think he may be dead!"

Groggy, Tama looked up to see the once-lovely features of Martine LaRochelle only inches from his. Now, however, her eyes were wild and her face was mostly hidden by bright red blood. A scalp wound, he thought automatically, they're always messy, just as several drops fell against his bare skin. "Are you all right?" he muttered, staring at her disheveled hair, muddy blue bathrobe, and bloody hands.

"Yes, yes, it's my husband who's hurt! Hurry!"

Groaning loudly, Tama pushed himself upright. "Pass me that bathrobe and then go in the bathroom and wrap a towel around your head to stop the bleeding—there's not room enough for all of us in this one little room."

In the pale gray light of a misty dawn, Tama and an equally groggy Colonel Yashimoto followed the half-stumbling *demi-Chinoise* through the soggy grass. Ahead of them loomed two surprisingly large buildings that, Tama supposed, housed the geese. In the distance he heard a muted honking and saw thirty or forty long-necked white birds disappearing over the crest of a small rise.

"She let them out," murmured Martine LaRochelle in an uninflected monotone as they rounded the corner of the buildings. "She let them out."

"Who—" began the *Commissaire de Police* but was stopped short by the sight of last evening's host lying in a morass of thick mud. The restaurateur wore nothing but a yellow and white *pareo* cloth knotted tightly around his ample stomach and a single muddy green slipper—the other one was half buried in the mud a few yards away. Just behind him was the chain-link fence that enclosed an equally muddy yard on the side of one of the buildings. A gate in the middle of the fence stood open.

"Michel!" Throwing herself to her knees in the viscous mud, Martine LaRochelle cradled her husband's head against her thighs. "Michel!" His pale blue eyes stared up at her unblinkingly. Even from here, Tama could see that Tahiti's only *producteur de foie gras* was dead.

"Looks like he's been bludgeoned," murmured Colonel Yashimoto into Tama's ear. "Look at those dents in his skull."

"Yes, and there's the wrecking bar that did it, lying in the mud over there."

"No chance of fingerprints with *that* mess."

"Fingerprints? In Tahiti?" Tama puffed out his great cheeks. "You've been watching too much television." He moved forward with his customary sure-footed delicacy that constantly astonished Colonel Yashimoto and gently drew the newly widowed Martine LaRochelle to her feet. "Come along, Madame. I fear there's nothing we can do for your husband. And we ought to have your head attended to—we can't have you bleeding to death."

With an anguished wail, Martine LaRochelle buried her head against Tama's massive shoulder, then let herself be led around the far corner of the barn and back towards the inn. A listless sun was just beginning to appear above the edge of the mountains surrounding the inn's narrow valley.

In a shed next to the inn Tama saw an open door, and through it a kerosene lantern casting a dim yellow glow and deep black shadows. The naked back of a slim male was bent over a dark green machine. "Who—" Tama began.

"It was Valérie Valescu who did it," said Martine LaRochelle with sudden animation, pulling herself away from Tama's arm and looking up at him with wide, childlike eyes, "Valérie Valescu! We were asleep, Michel and I, and we heard the geese honking and honking and when they didn't stop we got up and turned on the generator and then turned on all the lights and came out and there she was, trying to open the door to the goose pen with something in her hands and when Michel ran up to stop her she swung around and hit him in the head and then she hit me and I fell down and I saw her hit my husband some more and then she hit me again and when I woke up Michel wouldn't move and I came and got you and now you tell me he's dead." Her mouth fell open, and from beneath the towel wrapped around her head a rivulet of blood began to flow down her cheek with renewed vigor.

"He's dead? *Le patron?*" The young Tahitian waiter LaRochelle had called Cherry Cheeks stood in the doorway of the shed, a long wrench in his hand and smears of grease across his face. He wore nothing but a blue and white *pareo* wrapped around his slim hips. His eyes moved in wonderment from Martine LaRochelle to the *Commissaire de Police* to Colonel Yashimoto, as if one of them would tell him he was mistaken.

"Yes," said Tama, wrapping his arm protectively around Mar-

tine LaRochelle, "I'm afraid so. That's the generator you're working on?"

"It's stopped working. I think it's probably the flywheel, we had some trouble with it last week."

"Get it going as soon as you can—we're going to need electricity here." Tama nodded towards the inn. "Is there someone there to get us breakfast while we wait for the gendarmes?"

"No, Monsieur, all the other personnel went home for the night. I'm the only one here."

"Then keep working on the generator. We'll take care of our own breakfast."

But when they reached the front desk of the inn and Tama lifted the phone to call the *Gendarmerie Nationale* there was utter silence. "*Mince!*" he rumbled. "The damned phone line must have been knocked down by the storm." He turned to Colonel Yashimoto. "You see to Madame LaRochelle's head while I get coffee going. Then as soon as we get some clothes on, we'll drive out to the nearest phone."

Twenty minutes later Tama used the six-inch length of steel tubing bolted to the fender of his four-wheel drive Ford Explorer to pull himself into the front seat. "I don't know when I'll be back," he said to Colonel Yashimoto, "it may be minutes or it may be hours. Madame LaRochelle speaks some English. If an emergency comes up, there's always her car to get you out of here."

The state policeman nodded. "I think I can handle a middle-aged French sex-kitten—even with a crowbar in her hands."

But two kilometers later Alexandre Tama found the former sex-goddess at the second wooden bridge he came to along the mud-churned road. A raging torrent of white and brown water surged through the crossing where late yesterday afternoon a bridge had stood. Just this side of the flood waters was a light blue rental car: Lips pursed, the *Commissaire de Police* peered through its side window. Inside, mouth half open, huddled up against herself in the rear seat, was Valérie Valescu, sound asleep.

"That was quick," said Colonel Yashimoto admiringly as Tama dropped down from the driver's seat. The Hawaiian's eyebrows shot nearly to his hairline as he watched a badly disheveled Valérie Valescu climb down from the other side of the car. Her clothes and hair were caked with dried mud. "And you've already

caught the perp—I can see why you don't bother with fingerprints in Tahiti!"

Tama grimaced as he took V. V.'s elbow and guided her towards the front door of the inn. Her head was bowed and her eyes downcast. "I'm afraid it isn't going to be as simple as that. Where's Madame LaRoche?"

"Asleep, I think. We cleaned her up and found her some sleeping pills and got her to bed."

"And the boy? Has he got the generator going yet?"

"No. Now he thinks it's probably the fuel pump. His name's Dominique, by the way, and he seems like a nice little fellow even if LaRoche didn't like him."

Tama grunted. "All right, let's see if we can find something to eat—it may be a long time before we get out of here. In the meantime I'll tell you what's happening."

Valérie Valescu sat sullenly between Tama and Colonel Yashimoto at a small table in the unlighted kitchen and poked listlessly at the golden brown omelet Tama had cooked for her with a few deft turns of a blackened skillet. The Commissaire swirled a piece of bread into the last creamy remains of his own six-egg omelet and pushed it into his mouth. "The damned butter's hard as a rock," he grumbled. "Nothing *ever* works right in Tahiti for very long."

Colonel Yashimoto took a cautious sip of his inky-black coffee and turned his eyes towards the silent actress. "And she says she didn't do it?"

"Yes. She admits that she came back in the night to let the geese out of their pens—that's the wrong word, she *boasts* that she came to let them out. For some reason, someone at the rental car place left a wrecker's bar in the backseat and that's what gave her the idea. By the time she got back the rain had stopped and all the lights were off. She started prying at the gate that led to the barn and the geese started honking. She got the gate opened and the geese running around like crazy, and then, she says, in the total darkness, she felt a hand fasten around her neck."

"Scary," muttered Colonel Yashimoto. "And then what happened?"

"She dropped the crowbar and tried to scream. By this time she knew it was LaRoche, because he was yelling and cursing as he tried to strangle her. But then they slipped and fell down in the mud and she managed to pull herself loose and get away to the

car. She says she expected LaRochelle to come running after her but for some reason he didn't. She was too grateful to wonder why but just jumped in the car and drove away. By the time she got back to the bridge it had been washed away. So she climbed into the backseat and went to sleep." Tama sighed heavily. "The sign, I suppose, of a clear conscience and a good digestion."

The Hawaiian turned a dubious eye to the former movie star. "There's something here that doesn't make sense. She says she came back and did all this fighting and running in the *dark*? Where were the lights?"

"That is indeed the curious part. Let me go over this one more time with Mademoiselle Valescu to make sure I've understood her correctly, and then I'll fill you in."

For the next five minutes Tama prodded the actress with a series of softly spoken questions. As she replied, reluctantly at first, then with growing animation, her head snapped up and her voice became increasingly emphatic. Finally she rattled off a long string of machine-gun-like French, staring Tama squarely in the eye and pounding the table for emphasis.

Lips pursed, Tama nodded. "What it boils down to," he said in English to Colonel Yashimoto, "is that Madame LaRochelle couldn't possibly have seen Mademoiselle Valescu doing what she was supposed to have done because there simply weren't any lights."

"An' I *proof* it!" interjected Valérie Valescu in heavily accented English.

"Well, maybe," conceded Tama. "What she says is that when she came back in the night with just her parking lights on, she parked the car some distance away and made a careful reconnaissance around the entire inn. She was almost scared out of her wits when she came around the side of the inn and saw a light suddenly come on."

"From where?" asked Colonel Yashimoto.

"From the kerosene lantern Monsieur LaRochelle was using inside the shed as he worked to repair the generator. She could see him clearly."

"Ah. So she's saying the generator was already broken and—"

"—that Madame LaRochelle was nowhere in sight and couldn't have seen her even if she had been lurking in the darkness."

"That's a lie!" shouted Martine LaRochelle as she lurched with unsteady steps through a side door into the kitchen. She wore a fluffy white peignoir, her eyes were swollen and red, and she sud-

denly had to grip a countertop to keep her balance.

"Madame, you should be in bed!" exclaimed Tama, pushing his vast bulk to his feet and moving purposefully across the kitchen.

"But I tell you she's *lying*!" The half-Chinese pointed a violently trembling finger at Valérie Valescu. "We'd turned the generator off for the night just the way we always do when we go to bed. Then when we heard the geese honking, we turned it back on; there's a button right there beside the bed to switch it on. We turned on the lights in the inn and the courtyard and we came out and found her . . . found her at the pen. And . . . and . . ." She swayed against the counter, recovered her balance, and turned her enormous almond eyes to Tama. "Ask Dominique—he'll tell you the generator was working when he woke up this morning and that it stopped just before I came to get you. *Please*," she beseeched Tama, "that's the truth!" Once again she swayed from side to side—and fell directly into the *Commissaire's* arms.

"Bah," muttered Tama when he had returned to the kitchen from putting the semiconscious Martine LaRochelle back to bed, this time locking her door from the outside with the old-fashioned key he had found in its keyhole. "*She* says one thing, the other one says the opposite, and this wretched boy Dominique will probably say something entirely different. Where is *la Valescu*, anyway?"

"I took her upstairs for a shower in our bathroom—she *could* use a little soap and water, you know."

Tama nodded. "And with the door locked, she can't get in to scratch the eyes out of our skinny *demi-Chinoise*." He plopped himself down heavily in the plain wooden chair in which he had breakfasted and his eyes moved moodily across the table. "What do you think?" he asked, hefting a crusty piece of stale baguette and absently tapping it against the butter dish.

"It's one word against the other's. If they were in *my* jurisdiction, I guess I'd just try to sweat both of them until one of them broke."

"And that's just what the gendarmes and *Monsieur le Procureur* will do. Though how much her lawyers will let them sweat little Miss V. V. is open to question." Tama's eyes dropped to the butter dish on which only a partial curlicue remained. "You know," he said slowly, "there may be an easier way to find out which one of them is lying. Up on your feet, Mad Dog, and assume your official persona of Colonel Yashimoto, commander of the state police."

"What do you mean?" asked the Hawaiian as he rose to his feet.

"At some time in the future both of us will be required to

make formal depositions."

"About what?"

The Commissaire swung around to point at the glass-fronted commercial refrigerator that took up most of one wall of the kitchen. "About the state of the food in the refrigerator. I think that ought to tell us all we want to know about the generator and whether it was working or not when the LaRochelles went out to the goose pens."

"Ah, I see what you mean." Colonel Yashimoto drew himself up with as much dignity as his shorts and gaudy Hawaiian shirt permitted. "I am ready to testify as an official witness."

Tama pulled open the door of one of the main compartments. "Look," he said, "feel. All the food is still cold, although definitely beginning to get a trifle sweaty. The air is still cold, which is what you'd expect with a well-insulated refrigerator, whether the electricity has been off for a couple of hours or not. The test, however, will come when we examine the butter." He placed an enormous hand on the smaller door that housed the separate butter and cheese compartments and yanked it open. "There's what's left of last evening's butter. Well, pretend you're our gracious host and stick your finger in it, Mad Dog, and tell me what you find."

Colonel Yashimoto extended a cautious fingertip against the side of a curlicue of butter. "Hard as a rock," he muttered. "Let me try another one. Nope, they're all hard, every single one of them."

Tama nodded and, after prodding each of the curlicues with his own thick finger, shut the door. "And you will so state in your deposition?"

"Of course." The Hawaiian shook his head in gloomy wonderment. "So that means that Mrs. LaRochelle *was* telling the truth. The generator *was* working when they got up, the electricity *was* inadvertently left on for most of the night after they were attacked, and the refrigerator *was* going and the butter was kept cold. So she's telling the truth—and Valérie Valescu *did* kill her husband. What a story *this* will make!"

"*Au contraire*," murmured Tama wearily as he once again seated himself at the table. "Food in a turned-off refrigerator will stay cold for many, many hours, particularly at night when the refrigerator is never opened. Even the ice cubes won't start melting. That's what lets people in Tahiti who use generators turn them off from time to time, especially at night."

"But—"

"Let's think very carefully about what happens when the electricity goes off, Mad Dog. First, of course, the refrigerator goes off. *And so does the small electric heater or coil in the butter compartment that heats the compartment just enough to keep the butter soft. The main refrigerator remains cold. And the butter compartment becomes cold.*"

"What? You're saying that—"

"Exactly. If the generator's off long enough, instead of getting *softer*, the butter gets harder." Tama harrumphed noisily. "As far as I'm concerned, this proves the electricity was off and the generator broken just as Mademoiselle Valescu says it was when she saw LaRochelle working on it during the night. Which means that that beautiful wife of his is lying when she says it was on. And since she's lying about being able to see V. V. attacking them, it means she's probably also lying about who killed her husband."

"You think *she* did it?"

"Of course. Probably with the help of that cute little waiter of theirs. God knows that LaRochelle probably gave them both enough provocation. She obviously did see her husband and Valérie Valescu fighting at the geese pen—she was probably standing in the darkness right behind them. Then she watched V. V. drive away and decided that here was the golden opportunity she'd been waiting for to get rid of her brute of a husband. She picks up the crowbar V. V. has left behind in the mud and takes a swing, maybe hitting him on the shoulder. They fight, she gets a superficial but gaudy scalp wound, but finally ends up on top thanks to the crowbar. She may be skinny, Mad Dog, but she's *tall*. She'd get good leverage with those long arms of hers. And then she just waits until morning to spin me that story of hers."

"Hmmm." Colonel Yashimoto slumped down against the table and ran a crust of bread through the now thoroughly soft butter. "Probably so. But if I was her, a beautiful girl like that married to a brute like him, I'd change my story to saying the husband caught her in bed with the waiter and attacked them—with a knife maybe. And that she killed him in self-defense."

"In bed with the waiter out there in the mud?" Tama nodded sourly. "Well, it's an idea—and one that I'm sure will occur to her lawyer." His lips tightened and he glared angrily at Colonel Yashimoto. "But what I want to know, no matter what happens to this wretched woman, is, what am I going to do now for my supply of foie gras?" ●

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BY BARBARA OWENS

Last Inning

BY SCOTT MACKAY

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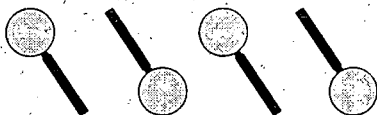
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New Poetry Contest

\$48,000.00 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the brand new North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets—who have never before won any type of writing competition."

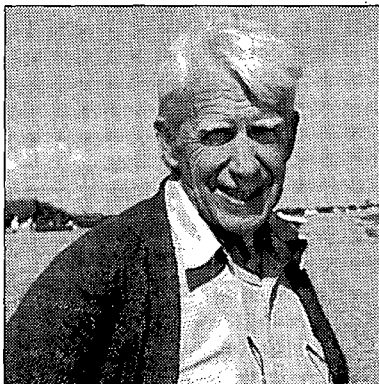
How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in **ONLY ONE** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

The National Library of Poetry
Suite 6126
1 Poetry Plaza
Owings Mills, MD 21117-6282

Or enter online at www.poetry.com

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.



Gordon Steele of Virginia, pictured above, is the latest Grand Prize Winner in The National Library of Poetry's North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. As the big winner, he was awarded \$1,000.00 in cash.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

"Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," added Mr. Ely.

World's Largest Poetry Organization

Having awarded over \$150,000.00 in prizes to poets worldwide in recent years, The National Library of Poetry, founded in 1982 to promote the artistic accomplishments of contemporary poets, is the largest organization of its kind in the world.

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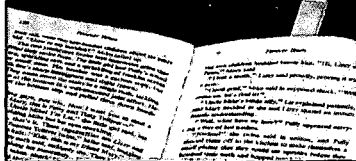
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